

Avoid Winter Foot And Ankle Woes

The season for ice, snow and sub-zero cold is here and with it comes the risk for serious foot and ankle problems for men and women of all ages.

Ankle sprains and Achilles tendon problems are very common in winter due to slips on icy sidewalks and from injuries that often occur when playing basketball and other indoor court sports.

Very often ankle sprains are not taken seriously and may not heal properly. This can result in long-term ankle instability and increases the risk for joint damage and eventual arthritis.

Initial treatment for ankle sprains should include rest, ice, compression and elevation to decrease pain and reduce swelling. Compression with an elastic bandage, splint or brace may be used for stability and to optimize healing. The ability to walk or put weight on the joint depends on the severity of the sprain, as determined by the podiatric surgeon when assessing ligament damage caused by the injury.

Even minor sprains should be protected by bracing for several days. In most cases, it takes at least three weeks for an ankle sprain to heal and up to eight weeks for severe sprains. Another winter malady, frostbite in the toes, is best treated by rapidly re-warming the affected extremities at the first sign of severe cold and numbness.

Nearly half of all frostbite cases involve the foot or ankle and, in my experience, rapid re-warming is effective in preventing tissue damage.

Therefore, at the first sign of possible frostbite it's imperative to seek prompt treatment and apply controlled heat right away with warm towels and warm water.

Cold weather impairs circulation, especially in women who smoke and drink caffeinated beverages. Blood vessels can shut down in the feet, causing the toes to turn white and blister. Just as with frostbite, it's critical to keep the extremities warm and insulated to avoid exposure to the cold.

Winter is also a good time to think about corrective foot surgery if you're not as active as during warm-weather months. For those who would benefit from surgery to correct bunions, hammertoes or persistent heel pain, scheduling the procedure in January or February will allow enough time for post-operative rest and to resume normal activities when the weather gets warmer.

Dr. Moore is an active staff member at Lake Cumberland Regional Hospital.