

It's Kind of Like Carpal Tunnel in the Feet  
by

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*Why isn't there a special name for the tops  
of your feet?* --Lily Tomlin

“My foot is numb at the end of the day and sometimes even in the morning. It feels like pins and needles from my ankle into the bottom of my foot. What do I have, doctor?”

“It looks like you have tarsal tunnel syndrome, Mrs. X.”

“Really. I didn't know there was such a condition, doctor.”

“Yes. It is really quite common, but it is often a diagnosis that is overlooked.”

“How can you be sure that is what I have?”

“We'll send you to see the neurologist, first. He'll do some studies on your nerves and this will help us to determine if these are working the way they're supposed to. His report will help me to make a decision in how to best treat you.”

“What are some of my treatment options if it is this, what did you call it?”

“Tarsal tunnel syndrome. We'll look to treat it conservatively, unless the neurology report reveals that the condition is more severe. Some of our options are to use arch supports or wider shoes with good support. Anti-inflammatory drugs may be used, or sometimes a steroid injection may be indicated. If your flat feet are the main cause, then custom orthotic devices may be  
“I can't guarantee 100% success, but the majority of patients note improvement

prescribed. We often use physical therapy to assist in relieving the symptoms.”

“Are there other causes besides flat feet?”

“Yes. The most common cause that I have seen is severe varicose veins or if a cyst is present over the nerve. When the veins or the cyst become enlarged, especially for people that stand on hard surfaces, like concrete, all day, there isn't enough room for the engorged veins or cyst behind the lacinate ligament on the inside part of the ankle and the main nerve, the tibial nerve, that enters the foot. When the nerve is squeezed in that small compartment, known as the tarsal tunnel, it can lead to numbness, tingling, pain, or any combination of these symptoms. If the nerve enlarges due to the chronic pressure, tarsal tunnel syndrome can develop.”

“What if the conservative treatments don't work? Can the condition become worse?”

“Yes, most definitely, it can become worse. It can lead to permanent numbness in the foot. There can also be spasms in the foot even down to the toes. If the condition fails to respond to conservative care, then the most common treatment is a surgical procedure called a tarsal tunnel release. It is very similar to carpal tunnel surgery where the ligament over the nerve is released to decrease the pressure on the nerve. The most obvious difference is that it involves the foot and the ankle, which needs to be protected for several weeks after surgery to minimize the chance of scar tissue forming and pressing on the nerve.”

“Does the surgery work 100% of the time?”

within the first 1-2 weeks. The amount of improvement often depends on how long the

patient has had the condition and how severe the nerve damage is. Even if it isn't total relief, there is usually significant improvement, though."

"I just want to walk without pain again."

"That's my goal for you, too. Let's make that appointment with the neurologist for you, so we can put you on the road to recovery."