What is Charcot's Foot and what causes it?

Charcot's foot is a rare but a serious complication of neuropathy (nerve damage) usually seen in people with diabetes. Nerve damage leads to progressive weakness of muscles and bones of the affected foot. Due to these weaknesses the foot bones are prone to fracture or dislocate easily, even in the absence of any major injury. As the pain goes unnoticed from nerve damage, you could continue walking on the foot leading to severe deformities of the foot. As this can be very disabling, early diagnosis and treatment is vitally important.

It is therefore important if you detect any changes in your feet that you seek professional help as soon as possible.

What are the signs of Charcot’s Foot?

The early signs of Charcot's foot are warmth, swelling and redness in the area of the foot or ankle that is affected. These early symptoms may occur suddenly. You may not experience any pain; although deep pain maybe a feature in some cases. Only one foot is likely to be affected in the majority of cases.

Failure to seek help for these early signs of Charcot's can lead to the development of a severe skeletal foot deformity. Changes in the shape of the foot may cause callus and foot ulcers to develop and may make it very difficult to find shoes that fit properly.

How is Charcot foot managed?

Charcot foot is managed by a multidisciplinary team within a Specialist Diabetes Foot service. The main aims of treating the Charcot's foot are to prevent further bone destruction and deformity which could result in hard skin and foot ulcers developing.

The management is focused on resting, stabilising and immobilising the foot or affected joint. This is best performed by placing the foot in a plaster or fibreglass cast or cast walker with a prescription insole which helps to reduce the pressure on the foot and prevent any further deformities.

You will need regular appointments with the specialist team to check the temperature of your foot. You will also have an xray of the foot when needed.

The cast is regularly replaced in order to observe the affected foot and note the temperature difference between the two feet.

You will need to wear the cast/ cast walker until the specialist team feel that you are ready to weight bear. This process can take several months.

Once the Charcot foot has resolved you may be provided with specialist footwear and insoles to protect your foot. These should be worn both indoors and outdoors.
How can I help my condition?

- You should follow the medical advice you have been given.
- You will need to keep your weight off your foot as much as possible.
- Comply with the suggested footwear.
- Keep your diabetes under control by following the advice you have been given in the past.
- Check your other foot daily as there will be more pressure on it and this could lead to further problems.
- Contact the podiatry department immediately if you notice any change or are worried about your treatment in any way.

You can search for other information leaflets on www.feetforlife.org (Date last accessed 17.1.17)

Please contact the Podiatry Appointment Office 01803 217712 if you:

-- require further information
-- require this leaflet in a different format