Mr Keith Winters

Specialist Orthopaedic Surgeon

MBChB, FRACS (Orth)

ANKLE ARTHRITIS

What is ankle arthritis?

Arthritis of the ankle occurs when the cartilage that lines the ankle joint, which is the joint between the tibia (shin bone) and talus (main ankle bone), is worn (see X ray, right). It may occur through simple wear and tear or can arise as a result either of trauma to the ankle such as a previous fracture, or as a result of an inflammatory condition such as rheumatoid arthritis.

What are the symptoms?

The two main symptoms that occur in ankle arthritis are pain across the front of the ankle joint and stiffness causing a loss of movement. There may also be swelling. The symptoms tend to occur whilst walking and often cause a limp. As the arthritis progresses, there may be destruction of the bony anatomy of the ankle causing the ankle joint and alignment of heel to become deformed.

What are the treatment options for ankle arthritis?

1. Non operative treatment.

The non operative treatment options include anti-inflammatory tablets, the use of a walking stick and occasional use of splinting. These tend to work only in very mild cases and will often not give satisfactory pain control.

2. Injection.

We will occasionally consider injection of the ankle joint, again in mild cases or if the diagnosis is not certain. The injection involves the insertion of a long acting local anaesthetic combined with a steroid into the ankle joint. The effects of the injection tend only to be temporary and will often wear off within a few weeks or months.

3. Ankle arthroscopy.

This involves keyhole surgery through two small incisions at the front of the ankle. In mild cases of arthritis, this allows us to tidy up any loose cartilage and remove spurs of bone around the front of the ankle joint. We can also treat small areas of cartilage damage in the ankle joint through keyhole surgery. As with injection and splinting, keyhole surgery and tidying up the joint tends to only be successful in mild cases of arthritis.

4. Ankle fusion.

A fusion of the ankle joint involves removing all residual cartilage of the joint and preparing the bony surfaces to allow the joint to fuse completely. This removes all movement from the ankle joint and is usually stabilised with two metal screws (see X Ray, right). The majority of ankle fusions are now performed through keyhole surgery. This significantly reduces the risk of complications. There is also a higher rate of successful union of the ankle fusion as the blood supply around the ankle joint is not significantly affected, as would be the case for a conventional open ankle fusion.

5. Total ankle replacement.

Ankle replacement is the latest and most exciting means of treating ankle arthritis. It involves resurfacing the bones of the ankle joint (the tibia and the talus) with metal and plastic implants. The advantage of ankle replacement over ankle fusion is that it preserves the majority of the up and down movement in the ankle joint. This makes for a more normal walking pattern whilst still having the advantage of removing the pain from the ankle arthritis. The implant used by Mr Winters is the Hintegra Total Ankle Replacement which has the best outcomes in both the scientific literature and the joint registries.