

## Weekend Doctor

By **DR. THOMAS F. VAIL**

When a fracture occurs in the foot and ankle, it is important to see a physician immediately for proper diagnosis and treatment. It will help regain complete function of the injury without causing further complications.

Recovery times vary depending on the type of fracture. A minor bone break may take a few weeks to heal, while a serious break in a bone may require months to as much as a year to heal.

New York Yankees left-hander Andy Pettitte fractured his left ankle on June 27 and was out for 10 weeks. He started simulated game/live batting practice against hitters on Sept. 5.

The 40-year-old Pettitte was hit on the ankle by a line drive in the fifth inning of a game against the Cleveland Indians. The Yankees said Pettitte healed without needing surgery.

Foot or ankle fractures should always be treated as well as the patient following up with a doctor to make sure that no other problems exist such as displacement of bone or dislocations.

Mistaking an ankle fracture for an ankle sprain also has serious consequences when the foot does not heal correctly. You should always seek the correct diagnosis to ensure proper recovery.

An ankle fracture involves a crack or break in the bones that form the ankle joint. A sprain involves the ligaments that hold the ankle bones together. Both injuries can happen simultaneously when the ankle moves beyond its normal range of motion, but a fracture requires more complex treatment than a sprain.

Sprains are so commonplace people want to believe that is what is going on, but prolonged pain and bruising should trigger awareness that it might not be just a sprain. Having pain but still being able to walk is not a good test to determine if it's a sprain or a fracture because walking is still possible with less-severe injuries.

Signs of a fracture include bruising, blisters, significant swelling or bone protruding through the skin. In addition to bone, ankle fractures can also involve cartilage surrounding the bones.

Patients with unrecognized ankle fractures have a high risk of developing infection, arthritis and foot deformities that may make it impossible to walk normally again.

It is imperative that patients with diabetes, vascular disease, alcoholism and immune deficiency receive prompt care from a foot and ankle surgeon because they are extremely vulnerable to nerve damage, infection and Charcot Foot, a very serious condition that can lead to foot deformity, disability, or even amputation.

Proactive prevention is crucial to avoid ankle injuries, including a good foot assessment and using canes or walkers for stability. I also advise buying from small shoe stores that have certified orthotists and shoe fitters who work with foot and ankle surgeons and assess if shoes and insoles support patients' feet correctly.

Incidents of ankle fractures in children, teenagers and young men are increasing mainly due to elite athletics.

Fractures need to be monitored so bones fuse together correctly and don't affect the foot's growth plate, a strip of new bone in pediatric patients that grows as feet lengthen. If the growth plate is damaged, it could produce bone spurs and arthritis, and pre-maturely halt bone growth.

Improved therapies and surgical approaches continue to offer solutions for complicated cases and produce better results, and are available to a wider range of patients:

- Total ankle replacements, similar to hip and knee replacements, were once reserved for geriatric patients but are now used in younger patients.
- Screws and other fasteners to bind bone and cartilage dissolve inside the body so second surgeries to remove them are not necessary.
- Newly developed synthetic and natural grafting materials are used in ankle repair when optimal healing would not otherwise occur.
- Small devices worn externally are now used to stimulate bone growth using pulsed ultrasound and electromagnetic fields.

So let's learn from Andy Pettitte's ankle fracture and seek immediate care and diagnosis with your podiatrist for any ankle problems to prevent further complications.



**Vail**

*Vail is with Advanced Footcare Clinic, Findlay. Questions for Blanchard Valley Health System experts may be sent to Weekend Doctor, The Courier, P.O. Box 609, Findlay, OH 45839.*