

Understanding Foot Drop

A Guide to Evaluation & Treatment



6 weeks post-op dorsiflexion

What Is Foot Drop?

Foot drop is a condition in which the muscles responsible for lifting the foot become weak or paralyzed.

Patients often notice tripping, difficulty clearing the foot during walking, weakness, or a "slapping" gait pattern. Foot drop is not a diagnosis itself, but rather a symptom of an underlying nerve or neurologic condition.

Why Early Evaluation Matters?

Historically, many patients were advised to wait for recovery before considering intervention. While spontaneous improvement can occur, prolonged nerve dysfunction may reduce the ability of muscles and nerves to recover.

Today, treatment often focuses on:

- ✓ Identifying the cause
- ✓ Monitoring recovery
- ✓ Preserving muscle function
- ✓ Determining whether surgical intervention may be beneficial

The greatest opportunity for recovery often occurs within the first year following symptom onset.

Recovery Timeline



Nerve Decompression / Nerve Transfer

- 2 weeks in a knee immobilizer
- Weight bearing as tolerated
- Physical therapy thereafter
- Recovery continues for months as nerves regenerate



Tendon Transfer / Ankle Fusion

- Approximately 6 weeks of immobilization
- Progressive return to weight bearing
- Physical therapy
- Improvement continues throughout the first year

Treatment Options



Conservative Care

- Physical therapy
- Bracing (AFO)
- EMG / nerve monitoring
- Ultrasound-guided injections in select patients



Surgical Options

• **Peroneal Nerve Decompression**

Relieves pressure on a compressed nerve and may improve the ability of the nerve to recover.

• **Nerve Transfers**

Transfers a functioning nerve branch to bypass damaged portions of the nerve and restore muscle activation.

• **Tendon Transfers**

Uses a healthy tendon to restore the ability to lift the foot when nerve recovery is incomplete.

• **Ankle Fusion**

Provides a stable foot position in severe or longstanding cases with limited remaining motor function.



Key Takeaway

Not all foot drop is permanent. Modern treatment options range from physical therapy and bracing to advanced nerve reconstruction, tendon transfers, and fusion procedures. Early evaluation may help preserve treatment options and maximize recovery potential.