

Diagnostic Imaging Pathways - Foot Ulcer (Diabetic)

Population Covered By The Guidance

This pathway provides guidance on the imaging of diabetic patients with diabetic foot ulcers.

Date reviewed: August 2013

Date of next review: 2017/2018






Published: August 2013

Quick User Guide

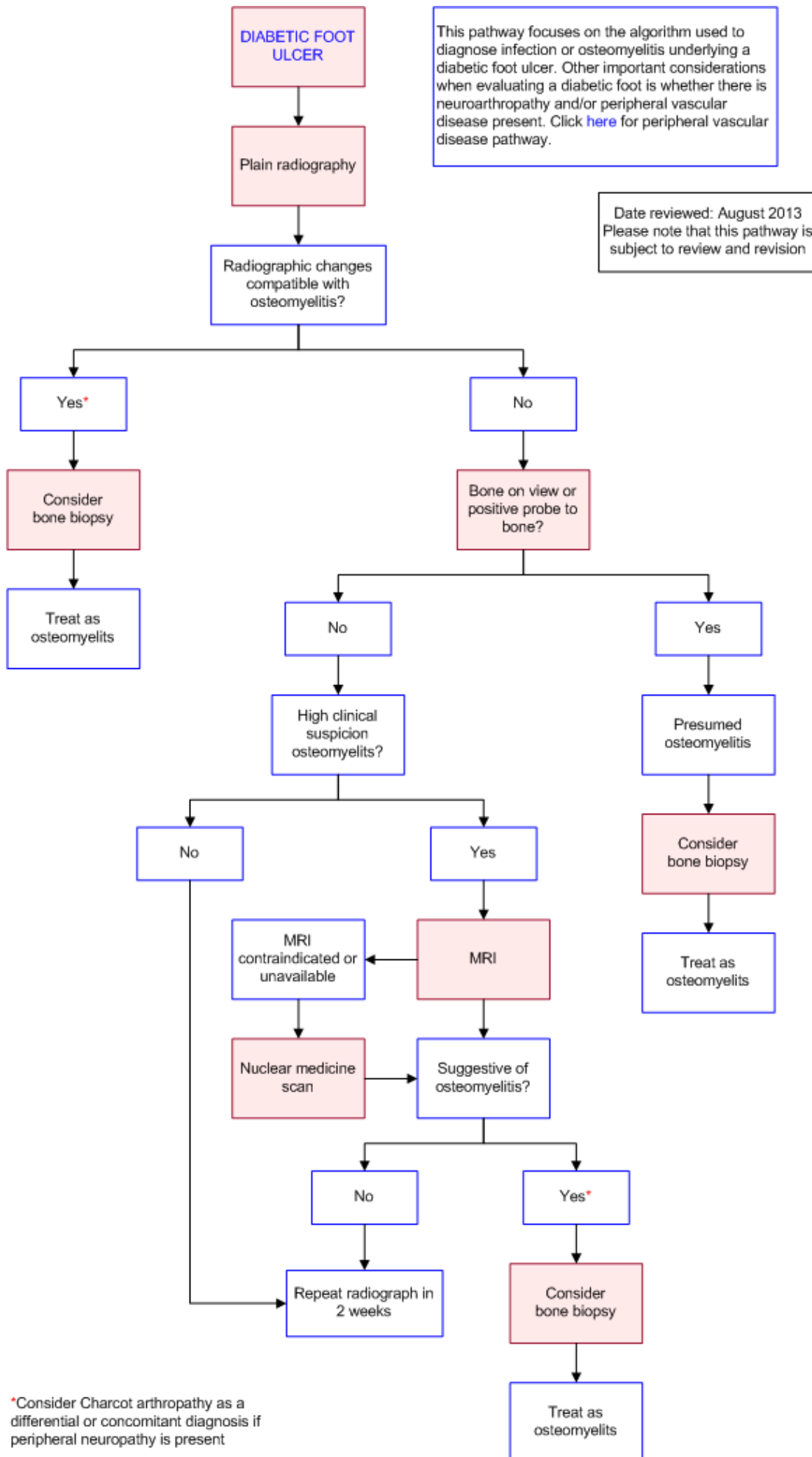
Move the mouse cursor over the **PINK** text boxes inside the flow chart to bring up a pop up box with salient points.

Clicking on the **PINK** text box will bring up the full text.

The relative radiation level (RRL) of each imaging investigation is displayed in the pop up box.

SYMBOL	RRL	EFFECTIVE DOSE RANGE
	None	0
	Minimal	< 1 millisieverts
	Low	1-5 mSv
	Medium	5-10 mSv
	High	>10 mSv

Pathway Diagram



*Consider Charcot arthropathy as a differential or concomitant diagnosis if peripheral neuropathy is present

Image Gallery

Note: These images open in a new page



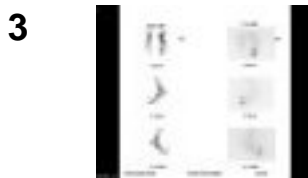
Diabetic Foot Osteomyelitis

Image 1a and 1b (Plain Radiography): DP and lateral views of a foot showing cortical erosion of the 4th metatarsal head in keeping with osteomyelitis (arrow). There is a small gas locule in the soft tissue between the 4th and 5th metatarsal heads which could indicate a gas forming organism causing an abscess (arrowhead).



Diabetic Foot Osteomyelitis

Image 2 (Plain Radiography): Extensive destructive changes consistent with a pyogenic infection which involves the IP joint of the great toe, all phalanges of the 2nd toe and 2nd MTP joint, all phalanges of the 3rd toe and 3rd MTP joint, proximal phalanx of the 4th toe and 4th MTP joint.



Diabetic Foot Osteomyelitis

Image 3 (Radionuclide Scan): Dual bone/white cell study (Tc-99 MBP/In-111 WBC). Delayed bone scan demonstrates intense focal uptake in the medial aspect of the proximal part of the distal phalanx of the right 1st toe. White cell study demonstrates intense focal uptake corresponding to the medial aspect of the proximal part of the distal phalanx of the right 1st toe. This scintigraphic appearance is consistent with osteomyelitis.

There is also focal intense uptake on bone scan in the inferior aspect of the calcaneo-cuboidal junction, which is not demonstrated on white cell study. This may represent neuroarthropathy or tendonitis.

- **Diabetic foot complications are the most common cause for non-traumatic lower limb amputation [1-4](#)**
- **An estimated 15% of patients with diabetes will develop a foot ulcer during the course of their disease, with 85% of diabetes related lower limb amputations preceded by a foot ulcer [5,6](#)**
- **Foot disorders are the most common diabetic complication requiring hospitalisation, and are associated with the longest length of stay [6](#)**
- **Approximately 20% of diabetic inpatients will have foot related complications which require acute care and/or management [1,3](#)**
- **Osteomyelitis in the diabetic foot generally occurs by the direct extension of infection from underlying soft tissue ulcers, with bacteria penetrating cortical bone to access the marrow cavity**
- **Osteomyelitis is a diagnostic challenge, and imaging is commonly utilised**
- **The presence of osteomyelitis increases the risk of amputation [1,4,7](#)**

Clinical Findings

- **The signs and symptoms of infection may be absent or masked by the coexistence of vascular disease or neuropathy [1](#)**
- **Clinical evaluation should include an assessment of the patient's diabetes**
- **The physical examination and laboratory findings which have shown to be likelihood of osteomyelitis include**
 - **Bone exposure – direct visualisation of bone or the ability to probe the base of the wound to bone. Depending on prevalence (sensitivity 38-87%; specificity 85-91%; positive likelihood ratio 6.4; negative LR 0.39) [8-10](#)**
 - **Ulcer area larger than 2cm² (sensitivity 56%; specificity 92%) [2](#)**
 - **Deep (>3mm depth) ulcer (sensitivity 74%, specificity 77%) [2](#)**
 - **ESR >70mm/h (sensitivity 90%; specificity 100%) [11](#)**
 - **ALP >135U/L (specificity 100%) [2](#)**
 - **"Sausage toe" appearance (i.e. red swollen digit) in instances of toe ulceration [12](#)**
- **Factors that did not modify the probability of osteomyelitis**
 - **Presence or absence of ulcer inflammation [2](#)**
 - **Elevated white blood cell count, regardless of cut off applied [13](#)**
 - **Result of swab culture [14](#)**

Plain Radiography

- **Initial procedure for imaging suspected osteomyelitis in the diabetic patient [15](#)**
- **Evidence of progression or resolution may be used to monitor response to antibiotic treatment**

- **Characteristic signs of osteomyelitis on plain radiograph include cortical erosion, periosteal reaction, mixed lucency and sclerosis** [15](#)
- **Pooled sensitivity of 54% and specificity of 68% for osteomyelitis on recent meta-analysis** [16](#)
- **Sensitivity is limited as radiological changes are delayed for up to four weeks following infection. Typically radiographs don't show abnormalities until about two weeks after initial infection, when nearly 50% of the bone mineral content has been lost** [15,17](#)
- **Specificity is limited by difficulty differentiating infection from neuro-osteoarthropathy in a patient with bony destruction (Charcot's arthropathy)** [15](#)
- **Plain radiographs can also reveal presence of radio-opaque foreign bodies, gas in soft tissues, calcified arteries fractures or bony abnormalities** [3,15](#)
- **Normal plain radiographs do not exclude osteomyelitis. An abnormal plain radiographs doubles the odds of osteomyelitis based on a limited systematic review** [1](#)

Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI)

- **Preferred advanced imaging modality for diagnosing osteomyelitis** [15](#)
- **Two metaanalyses reported similar pooled sensitivities of 90% (range 77-100%) and specificities of 79-82.5% (range 40-100%) in the diagnosis of foot osteomyelitis, outperforming plain radiography, ^{99m}Tc bone scanning and leucocyte scintigraphy** [16,18](#)
- **Advantages**
 - **No ionising radiation**
 - **Optimal visualisation of soft tissue structures, including detection of sinus tracts, deep tissue necrosis, abscesses and other inflammatory changes** [15](#)
 - **High sensitivity in early stages - reveals bony oedema useful for early detection of infection**

Nuclear Medicine Scans

- **Nuclear imaging scans are more sensitive than radiographs for detecting osteomyelitis during early stages of the disease, however they have poor specificity and abnormalities are slow to resolve**
- **Focal hyperperfusion, hyperaemia and bony uptake on delayed images are signs of osteomyelitis on bone scan. These signs may also be seen in other conditions such as fracture, neuroarthropathy and chronic soft tissue infection** [6,19](#)
- **Three phase technetium bone scan (Tc-99 MDP) has been reported on recent**



meta-analyses to be sensitive (80-90% but not specific (28-46%) for osteomyelitis, indicating poor discriminating ability. [16,19](#) The diagnostic performance was markedly inferior to MRI (diagnostic odds ratio 3.5 versus 150) [18](#)

- **Labelled leucocyte scintigraphy with either indium-111 (¹¹¹In) or technetium-99 (^{99m}Tc), improves specificity (to 74 and 85% respectively) for diagnosing acute infections [19](#)**
- **A combined dual study of Tc-99 MDP and labelled leucocyte scintigraphy (Indium-111) may improve sensitivity and specificity [6,20](#)**
- **Recent data suggest a role for FDG-PET/CT or SPECT/CT with bone and leukocyte scanning but the utility and cost effectiveness of this approach requires further study and is currently not recommended routinely by expert guidelines [15,21](#)**
- **Where MRI is unavailable or contraindicated, a radionuclide bone scan and a labelled white blood cell scan is recommended as the best alternative to rule out osteomyelitis [15](#) A negative bone scan effectively excludes osteomyelitis**

Bone Biopsy

- **The gold standard for diagnosis of osteomyelitis [15](#)**
- **Bone biopsy has a role not only in the diagnosis of osteomyelitis, but also the isolation of causative pathogen(s) and their antibiotic sensitivities to guide therapy**
- **Bone biopsy is performed under sterile conditions either during surgical debridement or percutaneously through uninvolved skin under fluoroscopic or CT guidance [7](#)**
- **Ideally bone specimens should be sent for both histopathology and microbiology [1,7,22](#)**
- **Diagnosis of osteomyelitis is based on isolation of bacteria and findings of osteonecrosis and infiltration of the bone with inflammatory cells on histopathology [7](#)**
- **Superficial swab culture does not reliably predict the bacteria causing osteomyelitis. Swab culture identified the identical pathogen as bone culture in only 22.5% of isolates [23](#)**
- **Disadvantages of bone biopsy include cost, availability of equipment and expertise, interference by antibiotics in culture results and potential for sampling error (false negative), contamination (false positive), invasiveness of the procedure and patient discomfort**
- **Bone biopsy should be avoided in patients with advanced vascular disease as the incision for bone biopsy may not heal [1,2](#)**
- **There have been no published reports of complications associated with bone biopsy of the foot [7](#)**

References

Date of literature search: April 2013

The search methodology is available on request. [Email](#)

References are graded from Level I to V according to the Oxford Centre for Evidence-Based Medicine, Levels of Evidence. [Download the document](#)

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