

FOOT PAIN: How to Manage and Prevent it



Most of us will have painful feet from time to time, but it's usually possible to take care of minor foot problems by making simple changes. Podiatrist and University Lecturer Gordon Hendry gives guidance on looking after your feet and explains when and how to get help for foot pain

Why do people get foot pain?

All kinds of reasons. Risk factors for foot pain include obesity, certain types of foot posture, getting older and sports injuries.¹ People with diabetes can develop neuropathic pain in their feet, and people with vascular problems can develop cramps.²³ The big one we can all do something about is poor footwear.⁴⁵

What should I look for when buying shoes?

High heels and narrow pointy toes are the obvious shoe design features that are hard on our feet, but there are other things besides worth bearing in mind. Our Shoe Shopping Tips can help you make a foot-friendly choice.

Is it better to rest my feet if I have long term pain?

While it's tempting to rest sore feet, it's important to keep active for wider health benefits. The strength, flexibility and coordination of your feet and ankles is like anything else – if you don't use it, you're going to lose it!

Getting active not only makes you fitter and stronger, but will help to improve proprioception – your sense of where your joints are positioned and how they're moving. This joint position sense helps you move more efficiently. Poor proprioception has been linked to osteoarthritis which causes pain and mobility problems.⁶

How can I be active when my feet hurt?

If your feet are sore, activity needs a bit more thought than just running on a treadmill. It's important not to make rapid changes in activity levels to avoid risking injury. Speak to your GP, physiotherapist or podiatrist if you're unsure.

Swimming and cycling are good, low impact activities. Wearing flip-flops can make walking to the poolside more comfortable. Shoes with a good, hard sole are best for cycling.

¹ Menz et al 2010 Rheumatology 49:1391-98

² Blyton et al 2012 Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews 1: article CD008496.

³ Abbott et al 2011 Diabetes Care 34(10):2220-24.

⁴ Dufour et al 2009 Arthritis Care & Research 61(10):1352-58.

⁵ van der Zwaard et al 2014 Annals of Family Medicine 12(5):432-40

⁶ Holla et al 2012 Journal of Rehabilitation Medicine 44(10):862-68.

The controlled smooth movements practised in tai chi, Pilates and yoga can help to improve strength, coordination and proprioception.⁷

Gradually building up the distance you can walk can be made easier with a fitness app or a pedometer.

There are simple foot-strengthening exercises you can do at home, some of them even while sitting down! You can find a foot pain exercise programme on the Arthritis Research website.

Simple [calf raises](#) and [toe raises](#) can improve ankle strength and endurance.⁸⁹ Using an exercise band around the leg of a chair and moving the foot in [inversion and eversion](#) directions against resistance can also improve strength around the ankle. [Toe exercises](#) train the little muscles in the feet which help to keep your toes straight and strong.

When should I seek professional help?

If there's an obvious issue you think might be causing your feet to hurt (such as walking a long way in ill-fitting shoes), try adjusting that yourself. A lot of foot pain can be, and is, successfully self-managed.

However, you should go to your GP for a referral or go direct to a podiatrist when:

- Painful feet have prevented you from doing everyday activities on most days over a two to four-week period
- Your foot pain is starting to affect your quality of life, restricting your ability to enjoy leisure activities, to work or to spend time doing things with your family
- Everything you've tried has either not worked or made it worse.

If any of the above apply to you, it's better to get help sooner rather than later. That way you'll reduce the loss of fitness that comes with inactivity and make it less likely that your pain will affect your state of mind or social life.

What can a podiatrist do to help my foot pain?

A podiatrist will usually be able to diagnose the cause of your foot pain and offer a treatment plan. Podiatrists have specialist knowledge with managing pain related to musculoskeletal problems, where abnormal mechanics in the foot lead to tissue damage and pain.

If your foot pain is caused by nerve damage related to diabetes or problems with blood flow, you may be advised to see other healthcare professionals who can help you manage those underlying conditions.

Orthoses and more...

Orthoses are specially-designed insoles that reduce unwanted movement and change the way forces (such as the impact of your foot on the pavement) are distributed.¹⁰ For

⁷ Li et al 2008 Age Ageing 37(5):575-8.

⁸ Hartmann et al 2009 Disability and Rehabilitation 31(25):2101-10.

⁹ Kelly et al 2014 Journal of the Royal Society Interface 11:20131188.

¹⁰ Mills et al 2009 British Journal of Sports Medicine 44:1035-46.

example, an orthotic for heel pain might be designed to increase the contact the rest of your foot has with the ground to reduce the stresses on your heel specifically.

Podiatrists can also recommend exercise programmes to enhance the stability and strength of your feet and legs and give guidance on general foot care.

Good foot hygiene includes:

- washing and drying between your toes
- wearing breathable socks (why not ask for a pair of merino or cashmere socks next time you're stuck for a gift idea?) and thicker socks in winter
- avoiding cheap and nasty flip flops
- applying sun cream to feet on those rare sunny days
- applying moisturiser to dry, hard skin.

You can find more information about foot pain and caring for your feet on these websites:

- www.cop.org.uk/common-foot-problems
- www.nhs.uk/Conditions/foot-pain/Pages/Introduction.aspx
- www.versusarthritis.org/about-arthritis/conditions/foot-and-ankle-pain/.

Shoe shopping tips

Following our shoe shopping tips might help you to reduce or prevent foot pain

1. Try before you buy

Avoid buying online unless you've tried on in store first or you've checked the site has a good returns policy.

2. Rule of thumb

You should have a thumb's width between the end of the shoe and your toes.

3. Wriggle room

The toe of the shoe should be deep enough that you can comfortably wriggle your toes around.

4. What about width?

Some retailers measure and fit shoes by width as well as length. If either side of the ball of your foot is pressed hard against the side of the shoe, look for a wider size or a different model.

5. How high?

For shoes you'll wear regularly, aim for heels no more than two finger widths high. Higher heels are ok occasionally, but just for a few hours.

6. Materials matter

Go for breathable, temperature-regulating materials – leather, Gore-Tex or mesh on sports shoes.

7. Fastenings

Laces, buckles, Velcro, elasticated... whatever the fastening, make sure the shoe fits snugly and securely over the top of the foot and back of the ankle.

8. Get a grip

A good, grippy outer sole helps maintain balance and reduce the risk of strain or injury from slipping.

You can hear more about foot pain from Dr Gordon Henry and other experts in [*Airing Pain* 73: Foot Pain](#).

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