

Why Do Your Feet Hurt?

By Lisa Collier Cool
Nov 14, 2011

Oh, the agony of the feet! From plantar fasciitis to stress fracture, there are many reasons for foot pain, which affects 43 million Americans. For starters, 88 percent of women wear shoes that are too small, reports the American Orthopaedic Foot & Ankle Society (AOFAS), often leading to painful deformities like bunions. Cruel shoes with pointy toes, thin soles, and sky-high heels compound the problem, says Steven Raikin, MD, director of foot and ankle services at Rothman Institute in Philadelphia. "One-inch heels can increase the pressure on your feet by about 22 percent, two inches can add up to 57 percent and three inches can add a whopping 76 percent."

Bad-news shoes aren't the only way we can abuse or injure the 26 bones, 33 joints and more than 100 tendons, ligaments and muscles in each of our feet. Here's a rundown of common causes and how to cure the hurt.

Plantar Fasciitis

Symptoms: You notice dull or sharp heel pain that's worst when you take your first steps in the morning or after sitting.

Cause: It's a myth that heel spurs are the usual culprits. According to American Academy of Orthopedic Surgeons, only one in 20 people with heel spurs has pain. Instead, the problem results from inflammation of plantar fascia ligament that connects your heel to the front of your foot, which can result from repetitive impact (from running, particularly downhill or on uneven surfaces, or other sports). Other risk factors include tight calf muscles, flat feet or high arches, weight gain, and shoes with poor arch support.

Treatment: Doctors typically advise non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs like ibuprofen or naproxen to ease the pain, taking a break from running and aerobics (swimming and biking are OK), calf and plantar fascia stretches, ice packs, heel cups, or custom orthotics. Night splints are uncomfortable, but often effective, studies show, while cortisone shots or surgery may be advised if all else fails.

Ingrown Toenail

Symptoms: The corner of a toenail curls down into the skin, causing redness, swelling, pain and, sometimes, infections (particularly if you're diabetic).

Cause: This pain in the foot is triggered by shoes that are too tight or by cutting toenails too short.

Treatment: You don't need to see a doctor unless you are diabetic, develop an infection or pain worsens despite home remedies: soaking your foot in warm water for 15 to 20 minutes a few times a day and gently pushing dry absorbent cotton under the corner of the nail. Trim toenails straight across the top—and don't try to remove the ingrown part. If the problem keeps recurring, you may need to have part of the nail removed.

Bunions

Symptoms: Red, calloused skin along the inside of the big toe, a bony bump, a big toe that is turned towards the other toes, joint pain.

Cause: These bony bumps are usually triggered by high-heeled, pointy, or tight shoes. The AOFAS reports that 55 percent of U.S. women have bunions, which are nine times more common in women than men. Arthritis is a less common cause.

Treatment: To ease the pain, wear comfortable shoes that don't press against the bunion. Most people don't realize that their shoe size changes as they age, and that it's important to have both feet measured, since one may be bigger. Use bunion pads from the drugstore to cushion the bump and OTC pain relievers like ibuprofen or naproxen. If the pain limits daily activity, surgery may be recommended.

Stress Fracture

Symptoms: Foot pain that begins gradually, worsens with exercise and eases with rest, swelling on the top of the foot or outside of the ankle, tenderness and, sometimes, bruising. If untreated, the pain tends to become more frequent and severe.

Cause: These small cracks in bone are the most common overuse injuries of the foot and ankle and usually result from repeated foot stress due to weight-bearing exercise. Other risks include osteoporosis, being new to exercise and doing too much too soon, not having the proper shoes, and improper training or incorrect athletic techniques.

Treatment: The main treatments are rest, ice packs, and OTC pain relievers. It takes 6 to 8 weeks for a stress fracture to heal. Your doctor may recommend protective footwear or a cast. In some cases, surgery is required. Once you've recovered, resume sports gradually.