

BE WELL

How to Prevent Plantar Fasciitis

By Debbie DeAngelo
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If there's one thing I know for sure about plantar fasciitis (PF), it's that I never want to have it. I'm sure you feel the same way.

As a competitive ballroom dancer, and instructor, it would be the bane of my existence. Fellow dancers, friends, and patients often describe in detail how the pain on the bottom of their foot near the heel sidelines their activities. Each year, two million people are affected by and treated for PF. Let's not join the ranks. This condition occurs when the plantar fascia, a strong band of connective tissue that extends from the heel to the ball of the foot and supports the arch, becomes irritated and inflamed. Its main job is to act like a shock absorber against all of the use and abuse our feet undergo day in and day out. Needless to say, it can become strained, bruised, and damaged, which leads to heel pain and stiffness. The hallmark sign is discomfort along the bottom of the foot near the heel, especially with the first few steps after getting out of bed in the morning and after extended periods of rest or prolonged standing. The pain may subside as you walk around but it typically returns by day's end.

Risk factors that make you prone to this slow healing disorder include: high-impact activities like running and playing sports; prolonged standing on hard surfaces; tight calf muscles, flat feet, or high arches; wearing minimally supportive shoes; and being overweight. It's more common as we age because the plantar fascia loses elasticity.

Rather than ignoring your feet until the "dogs start barking," pay attention to them to reduce the likelihood of developing PF. Try to maintain a healthy weight; wear shoes that support your arch and cushion your heel; seek evaluation to

determine if you need orthotics in your shoes; and cross train when you exercise to reduce repetitive motion. It's essential to perform specific exercises to stretch your feet, calves, and Achilles tendons. In fact, the ones below are some of the same stretches that are recommended for treating PF.

Plantar Fascia Stretch. While seated, cross one foot over the opposite knee. Grasp your toes and pull them toward your shin. If it's difficult for you to position yourself in this way, then loop a towel behind your toes, extend your leg, and pull the toes towards you with the towel. Hold the stretch for 10 seconds and repeat 10 times on each foot. Ideally, you should engage in this exercise before stepping out of bed in the morning.

Calf Stretch. Lean forward against a wall with one leg in front, knee bent, and one straight leg in back with the heel pressed into the floor. For optimal stretch, shift your hips forward towards the wall and hold for 10 seconds. Repeat 10 times before switching legs.

Ankle Alphabet. From a seated position, lift your foot a few inches off the floor and use it to form the letters of the alphabet in the air. Once you've "written" all 26 letters, repeat with the other foot.

Toe Curls. Place a towel on the floor and stand on it barefoot. Grasp the towel by curling your toes, then straighten your toes to release the towel. Repeat for one minute before alternating feet.

If you do succumb to PF, healing takes weeks to months and often improves with home-based treatment. Sometimes medical management is required. Home treatment consists of avoiding activities that place excessive strain on your heel for a few weeks, which means you may need to change your exercise routine to include lower-impact activities while you recover; icing the heel; wearing a night splint while sleeping; using orthotics in your shoes and wearing shoes with cushioned soles and arch support; abstaining from going barefoot; stretching your feet and lower legs; and taking anti-inflammatory medicine.

As you can see, an ounce of prevention is definitely worth a pound of cure.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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