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Keeping your feet in Shape

By Shaleen Bhagat

Without a second thought, your feet take you wherever you want to go, leading you from point A to point B. When you have the ability to comfortably walk around you don't often think about the condition of your feet. However, the older you get, the greater the chances you have of developing foot problems.

A closer look at the human foot reveals a very complex structure of more than 100 working parts. Each foot is made up of 26 bones, 33 joints, 107 ligaments and 19 muscles and tendons! Our feet support more weight than any other part of our body. With every step, 1.5 times our body's entire weight lands on each foot! With just one hour of strenuous exercise, our feet cushion up to one million pounds of pressure. It is estimated that the average person takes between 8000 and 10,000 steps a day, which in a lifetime would carry you about 195,000 kilometers or 4 times around the world! So it's no wonder that around 75% of us will have foot related problems at some point in our lives.

The arches in our feet make it possible for feet to do what they are designed to do. A normal arch is strong and springy. It acts as a shock absorber each time the foot contacts the ground, it also provides balance and power while we walk. With wear and tear, our arches can sometimes fall, resulting in what is commonly known as "flat feet". If the arches go flat, the muscles have to work harder, you have decreased balance and more stress is placed on the bones of the foot. As a result, feet become strained and are prone to injury.

Having flat feet can also cause the foot to tilt inwards – this is called pronation. Pronation is a normal movement that allows the foot to adapt to variations in terrain but over pronation can cause over use conditions such as plantar fasciitis, achilles tendonitis, shin splints, patellofemoral pain syndrome in the knee, hip pain and even low back pain. Research has shown that a foot imbalance, such as over pronation, can be a strong contributing factor to low back pain - the most common form of chronic pain.

When patients come to me with pains in their lower extremity, I always find it beneficial to assess their feet in the standing position and during walking, to check for abnormalities that might be contributing to their back, hip, knee or ankle problem. Even if their feet don't hurt, they contribute to a person's overall postural balance. In some cases I suggest orthotics. Orthotics are insoles that are placed inside your shoes to provide specific support to different areas of the foot, they can play an integral role in the overall treatment of many problems caused by abnormal ankle and foot mechanics. The function of orthotics is much more than an arch support. Orthotics realign the structures of the foot and leg to prevent misalignment, and keep the body balanced over the feet and prevent muscle strain in the foot and leg. As your foot rests on a properly constructed orthotic, it is gently and consistently directed into the correct position (or at least a better position) for walking, running, and standing.

If your foot problem is not very severe, a simple orthotic purchased at a medical store or pharmacy can be effective option. These orthotics are made to fit the "average foot" and

can be found to fit almost any shoe style. There are also some brands of shoes that have well-designed soles that provide excellent orthotic support. However if you have more advanced changes or complex feet problems, a more effective approach is to have a custom made orthotic. These are often made from a mold or a computer image of your foot and are tailored to correct the specific problems that exist in your foot. Within a few weeks of wearing an orthotic people generally find relief from their aches and find that their feet and legs can now function at their highest potential. One thing to remember is that if you take care of your feet, they will take care of you!

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