

SELF-CARE FOR THE FEET
Building a Strong Foundation
Karen Ball NBCR, LMT

*Every part of you has a secret language.
Your hands and feet say what you've done.*
Rumi

Some people claim that of all our body parts, our feet tend to suffer the most. I don't know if that's true, but I do know that there is nothing worse than sore feet; and sore feet are guaranteed if neglected. Just ask the thousands of Americans that annually report chronic foot pain.

Our feet are our trusty servants, providing a foundation upon which we 'take a stand' and with which we are able to move forward in life. The truth is, most of us take them for granted *until* they begin to scream, "Stop!"

As a credentialed reflexologist since 1983, I often hear the statement, "My feet are killing me!" Perhaps that comment would be more accurately stated as, "I'm killing my feet". We stuff them into poorly designed, ill-fitted shoes and then proceed to stand on them hour after hour without rest. We pay little attention to the fact that the feet carry our entire body weight every day of our lengthy existence here on earth.

The Special Role of the Feet and Legs in Health

Countries all over the world have developed unique ways to take care of the feet. Foot massages, various styles of reflexology, specific exercises and hydrotherapy treatments speak to the importance cultures place on the feet, and the recognition of the need to take care of them.

In addition, whether we are talking about the sen lines in Thai medicine, meridians in Traditional Chinese Medicine or the nadis in the Indian Ayurvedic model of medicine, there are key points on the feet that are believed to be closely associated with the wellbeing of the rest of the body.

As the old saying 'Aging starts from the feet and legs' indicates, the legs and feet are often considered a barometer of health, especially in Eastern cultures. They speak of the legs and feet as the second heart, because it is muscle contraction and movement of the lower extremities that returns deoxygenated blood back to the heart. When the soles of the feet lack stimulation, circulation of the blood in the feet and the legs tends to lessen.

Since the feet mirror our general health, these ancient and tried models of medicine recognized that foot ailments could be the first sign of more serious medical problems. Conditions such as arthritis, diabetes, nerve and circulatory disorders can show their initial symptoms in the feet, so it is prudent to pay attention. Who knows, you may be walking on the solution to many of your problems!

Taking Care of the Feet

Some interesting facts that may convince you to offer your feet some love and attention:

- * The human foot contains 26 bones, 33 joints, 107 ligaments and 19 muscles.
- * One quarter of the human body's bones are in the feet. When these bones are out of alignment, so is the rest of the body.
- * Typically in a person's 30's or 40's, the natural fat pads on the plantar surface of the feet gradually begin to thin out, resulting in less cushioning and often leading to foot pain.
- * During an average day of walking, the forces on your feet can total hundreds of tons. That is equivalent to a fully loaded cement truck!
- * Each time the heel lifts off the ground when walking, the toes are forced to carry one half of your body weight!

Shoes

I once read that the two 'advancements' in civilization that have contributed the most to our chronic physical pain are the chair and shoes. Apparently, it is those evolutionary developments that have led to the chronic back and foot pain that society lives with now.

Since we are rapidly advancing towards covering as much of the earth in concrete and cement as we can, I don't see the demise of shoes in the modern world any day soon – so, that means we must take counteractive, preventative measures to keep our feet healthy and strong. We live in a culture that boasts over 40,000 adults suffering from chronic foot pain! Being mindful of your shoe choices is the first step to dropping your potential membership in that club!

As a massage therapist, you well know the ramifications of wearing high heels on the feet, knees, back and neck, so I hardly think that I need to delve into the problems of habitually wearing a shoe with heels of more than one inch.

Freewheeling flip-flops and slides fall into the same category of 'Wear At Your Own Peril'. When you wear shoes that don't stay connected to your

feet when walking, the 'grip' needed to keep that footwear on causes a chain reaction beginning in your feet and lower body.

□□The metatarsal heads and the distal phalanxes of your toes are driven into the ground creating higher-than-normal pressure. Think calluses, metatarsalgia, permanently contracted toes and risk of fracture.

* The dorsal surface of the phalanges is driven up into the top of those cute slides. Think corns, permanently contracted toes and calluses.

* Unnecessary muscle tension is created in the lower leg. (Try this: while seated, place your hands on the anterior leg muscles, and grip your toes hard. Or place your hand on the back of your calf while gripping your toes hard. Feel the muscle contractions in your leg?) Think plantar fasciitis/fasciosis.

* In addition, wearing flip-flops when your arches are weak will eventually contribute to their further weakness and collapse. Think plantar fasciitis/fasciosis.

Some other points to consider when out shoe shopping – the most important part of maintaining pain-free feet:

* The feet swell as the day proceeds, especially in warmer weather, so purchase your shoes at the end of the day.

* Stand to measure your feet. The average foot expands by nearly two sizes when full body weight is put upon them. If the store you plan to visit does not measure its customers' feet (as fewer and fewer do these days), then stand on a piece of paper before venturing out and have someone draw the shape of your feet for you to measure yourself. (Don't attempt to do on your own. You need your full weight on your feet to get an accurate reading.) Take that drawing with you to the store and check the length and width of your drawing against the sole of the shoe you are interested in. Ensure that there is a little space between the edges of your foot measurement and the outer contour of the shoe.

* Most people's feet are a little different in size. Buy for the larger one.

* Nine out of 10 women tend to wear shoes that are too small for their feet. The feet expand as we age, especially in width. This is due to years of gravitational pull on them, weight gain and the weakening of arches. Measure! Your shoe size at age 45 or 50 will not be the same as when you were 20 years old.

Since footwear is a major contributor to foot pain, take note of these points when selecting the shoes you plan to work in all day:

* Don't wear the same pair all day, every day. Doing so allows only some of the intrinsic muscles of the feet to gain strength, while others weaken from lack of use. Different shoes will ask different muscles to engage. At

the very least, remove your workday shoes when arriving home and change into something else for the evening.

*□ Inadequate support, either due to the design of the shoe or their age, causes the internal shock layers (which you cannot see) to lose their 'oomph'. Replace shoes *before* the outer soles are worn down.

* Inflexible soles will not allow the muscles of your foot to move through their necessary and natural dynamic of contraction and expansion. You should be able to take a shoe in your hands and bend it nearly in half.

Self-care

I believe that self-care *is* healthcare, so I want to share some additional actions that you can easily integrate into your life that will result in happier, healthier feet.

Foot Soak

In ancient Chinese cultures it was the habit to sit in the evening and soak the feet. This activity not only cleansed the feet, but also served as a bridge between the day's busy activities and an evening of relaxation.

Soaking the feet in warm water with Epsom salts will draw out excess lymphatic fluid, soften and relax the tissue and draw your attention to the feet and body, away from your busy, monkey-mind. Or, perform an exfoliating scrub made with a handful of rice ground into coarse flour, combined with one teaspoon of olive oil and enough raw honey and apple cider vinegar to make a thick paste. After drying off your feet, lay back and rest your legs up against the wall for a few minutes, so as to raise them above your head and reverse blood flow. This is a great way to wind down in the evening.

The next three will go far in helping you to maintain strength, flexibility and alignment in your feet.

Stretch and Strengthen

After the ankle joints, the joints of the toes are the most important in the foot because they propel us forward as we 'toe off'. Without strength and mobility in the toes, walking comfortably and efficiently is difficult and often painful.

The beauty of this exercise is that it manages to strengthen and stretch pretty well every muscle in the foot, as well as the toes. Not only will you be doing your toes a favor, you will be assisting your foot to maintain a strong arch and prevent painful conditions like plantar fasciitis and metatarsalgia from developing.

All you do is place some small rubber or silicone balls (about 2.5 cm) on the floor in front of you while you are seated. With bare feet, pick up each of the balls with your toes and move to the side – or bring the foot holding the ball into a tailor position across your other leg and remove the ball from your toes with your hand. Aim to pick up at least a dozen balls. Repeat with other foot.

You will see your toes 'scrunch up' as you perform this exercise. Work to engage all of the toes. The action of picking up the balls is stretching the dorsal tissue and strengthening the plantar, and increasing the mobility, strength and flexibility of the joints in the toes and the metatarsals. Win-win for the entire foot.

Play Ball

Use a ball (either tennis, golf or silicone), a TheraBand foot roller, a Foot Wheel or Nano foot roller to stretch and massage the plantar surface of your feet. While seated move your foot back and forth over your chosen tool, using as much pressure as is comfortable for you. With time, you will be able to put more weight into the roller and relax the deeper layers of muscle and fascia along the entire plantar surface of your feet.

Toe Separators

This one is even easier.

When sitting around in the evening, place separators between your toes. That's it.

By doing this every evening, you are encouraging the muscles and tendons of your toes to lengthen. The goal is to straighten and flatten the toes, and widen the forefoot. An ideal foot will present with the sides of the foot angling out from the calcaneus to a wider base at the toes and forefoot. A solid base like this gives you more stability; lengthening and straightening the toes will help prevent the development of problematic bunions, hammertoes, mallet and/or claw toes.

Start with very soft sponge separators if your toes are tight, and gradually work up to silicone ones that will spread your toes apart further.

None of the above activities is difficult, time-consuming, requires expensive equipment or that you leave the comfort of your home. I have both balls and separators sitting by my TV remote. It's a nightly ritual to pick up small balls with my toes, massage the bottoms of my feet with a large ball and separate toes while reading a novel or watching a favorite

program. Easy and simple, and habits I guarantee you will never regret having formed.

Finish your nightly love-fest with your feet by massaging in rich foot butter infused with a favorite essential oil intended to relax the feet and body. Better yet, if you are trained in reflexology, perform a few of your favorite techniques. Just a few minutes on each foot and you will likely notice your body and mind pointing you towards bed and a sound relaxing sleep.

Even if you don't currently have any issues with your feet, I highly encourage you to be proactive. In my reflexology practice, I see a high proportion of clients who have chronic foot pain that is mostly due to neglect and a lack of awareness. Do something *now* so you don't find yourself later not being able to work comfortably or participate in other activities you currently enjoy in your life.

Treat your feet well; they tend to return the favor.

Resources:

www.optp.com for TheraBand, the Foot Wheel and Nano foot roller.

www.amazon.com for 2.5 cm. silicone and sponge balls

References:

<https://www.ipma.net/page/15>

<https://www.foot.com/foot-facts/>

<https://www.webmd.com/pain-management/guide/foot-pain-causes-and-treatments#1>

Put Your Best Feet Forward by Geraldine Villeneuve

Simple Steps to Foot Pain Relief by Katy Bowman

Originally published in Massage Magazine 10/2018