

# The Agony of the Feet: Plantar Fasciitis

By Virginia "Gini" Davis, PT, MA

**D**o you experience pain in your heel or across the entire bottom of your foot? Does that pain get worse with the first few steps in the morning or become more intense over the course of the day? If so, you may have plantar fasciitis.

## What is plantar fasciitis?

The plantar fascia is the strong, fibrous tissue that supports the muscles from the heel forward through the arch to the ball of the foot. Abnormal stress may cause small tears in the plantar fascia that result in the pain, inflammation and swelling called Plantar Fasciitis. Because the symptoms are similar to those of muscle strain, nerve damage, arthritis and tarsal tunnel syndrome, you should seek a professional diagnosis and referral for appropriate physical therapy treatment.

## What causes plantar fasciitis?

Lack of muscle flexibility is one of the most common causes of plantar fasciitis. To maintain flexibility in the calf muscles, develop the habit of stretching them at least three times a day—especially before getting out of bed in the morning and after being seated for a period of time. Stretching while standing is best done while wearing shoes to support the foot.

A change or increase in weight-bearing activities such as running, squatting, lunging or lifting heavy objects may trigger plantar fasciitis. Always stretch thoroughly before and after you participate in these activities for an extended period of time. It is also important to wear properly fitting shoes.

Hard surface activities, particularly running with increased speed and uphill, can put additional strain on the plantar fascia. Runners should not increase speed and distance at the same time. Aerobics, stair climbing and court sports can also cause irritation and should be approached with a gradual increase in activity level. Cross training with "deep water running", swimming and non-weight bearing equipment (stationary bicycle) can help prevent problems. Always stretch the calf muscles before and after any activity. If possible, switch activities to a grassy field or softer surface to minimize irritation.

Misalignment of the feet due to particularly flat or high arches, being overweight or rapidly gaining weight (as in pregnancy) may precipitate foot pain. A thorough musculoskeletal evaluation should be performed to determine other causative factors. Sometimes, the solution is as simple as a properly prescribed orthotic shoe insert.

Shoes that do not flex under the ball of the foot, lack arch support or lack cushioning can cause foot pain. Changing from high heels to flats or breaking in a new pair of shoes may also cause irritation. Be sure shoes are specifically designed for the activities that you are pursuing and that they are properly fitted to your feet.

## What to do if you believe you have plantar fasciitis

Use ice to reduce the inflammation and limit activities that may cause additional damage to the tissue. A non-steroidal anti-inflammatory (Aleve, Ibuprofen, but NOT Tylenol) taken as directed may also prove helpful. After 48 hours, begin gently stretching three times per day. Continue to use ice 1-2 times a day while limiting weight bearing physical activities until discomfort subsides. If pain continues or does not subside after several weeks, consult your doctor.

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