



# Exercise and Orthotics for Foot Pain

By Virginia "Gini" Davis, PT, MA

Two statements about our feet are generally true: we take them for granted and we frequently take advantage of them. Rarely do we pay attention to our feet, which carry us around all day and most of the night, unless they hurt or we're attempting to squeeze them into a stylish pair of shoes that don't fit. Unfortunately, we expect to put our feet into shoes, go about our business and pound them into the ground until we experience pain.

## Important to the Whole Body

The foot is a functional unit that is biomechanically designed to provide both support and shock absorption. Those two functions are incredibly important to the function of the whole body. The foot functions in association with the ankle, knee, hip, pelvis, spine and remainder of the body, thus problems with the feet may affect other body parts and problems in other body parts affect the feet.

## Orthotics for Foot Pain

An orthotic, which is an orthopedic appliance or apparatus used to support, align, prevent or correct deformities, or to improve function of the movable parts

of the foot, may be helpful with foot pain. However, if the foot is not flexible or strong enough, even expensive orthotics may not work to alleviate the pain. Foot exercises may need to come first. The orthotic, which may help the foot to function better and help it absorb shock from the body above and the ground below, may not function appropriately without first preparing the foot with necessary mobility and strength. Orthotics are not the answer to all foot pain and problems. However, orthotics may be helpful when combined with foot flexibility and strengthening exercises to prepare the foot for improved biomechanical alignment. Sometimes after muscular flexibility and strength in the feet are attained, orthotics may not be needed at all.

## Over-the-Counter Orthotics

Over-the-counter orthotics, available at most running or sports stores, can provide cushioning and some positioning. Placed into the shoes to cover the full length of the inside of your shoes, they can be as small as a metatarsal pad or a gel heel pad. These devices, when

appropriately placed, can help a lot of people for little expense.

## Prescription Orthotics

Prescription orthotics, specifically fabricated for your feet, may help when over-the-counter types have failed. However, they may not help unless the strength and flexibility problems in the feet are addressed first and frequently not until other medical or surgical problems are addressed. Orthotics alone will not work if the patient and medical provider do not address other foot problems.

Feet are a very important part of our bodies, which require special care and attention. Don't take them for granted, especially if you are an active exerciser, walker or runner, or your job requires long hours of standing and moving about. Take care of problems early, small problems only get worse with time.

*Virginia Davis is a Physical Therapist and Owner of Crescent City Physical Therapy and Perfect Fit Shoes store. She may be reached at [Gini@crescentcitypt.com](mailto:Gini@crescentcitypt.com). See ad on page 7.*

## How to Determine if You Need Exercises and/or Orthotics Virginia Davis, PT, MA, Foot and Ankle Specialist

How to know if orthotics are the answer to your painful foot problems or whether you need to exercise your feet:

- Do you have bunions, calluses, or toes that will not straighten out?
- Can you bend your toes at every joint of each toe or make your arch higher or flatter?
- Can you spread your toes or move your ankles freely in all directions? Is there a difference between feet? Are any movements painful?
- How strong are your feet: can you walk 10 steps on your heels or on your toes without pain?
- Wet the bottom of your feet and make a footprint: is there an arch, or is your foot flat?
- If you have little flexibility or strength in your feet, the movements produce pain, or you have a very high arch or very flat feet, you may benefit from an exercise program BEFORE purchasing expensive orthotics for your feet. Many of these conditions are prevalent with a variety of foot problems and may be appropriately treated with your physician AND physical therapist working together to solve your specific problems.