

How To Keep Your Feet Happy

By Dr. Robin Ross.

Originally Published in PARADE Magazine, June 1, 2008.

Summer may be the time to wiggle your toes and run barefoot on the beach. But not for everyone. More than half of American men and women say they regularly experience foot pain that interferes with daily activities, according to a 2007 survey by the American Podiatric Medical Association. Women are especially prone—84% report that they've experienced a foot ailment. But you don't just have to accept nagging foot pain. Here are some of the most common problems and the treatments for them.

Bunions

WHAT IT IS. A bump that develops toward the base of the big toe, a bunion can become swollen and painful. Bunions often are hereditary but also can be caused by faulty foot biomechanics and arthritis. **HOW TO AVOID IT.** Stay away from pointy, narrow shoes. Opt instead for those with a wide toe box and good support, such as sneakers. Custom orthotics (inserts that fit into a shoe to hold the foot in the correct position) also may slow development of a bunion. **TREATMENT.** Padding or taping the affected foot can relieve bunion pain, as may orthotics, anti-inflammatory medications, or steroid injections. In severe cases, surgery may be an option.

Heel pain

WHAT IT IS. Heel pain is most commonly caused by plantar fasciitis, an inflammation of the long band of connective tissue that runs from the heel to the ball of the foot. The bottom of the heel and arch of the foot can become very painful, especially with the first step in the morning or after resting and then getting up. Common causes are excessive running, jumping, or any other activity that stresses the tissues of the feet, obesity, and high- or low-arched feet. Pain also may be caused by a stress fracture of the heel. **HOW TO AVOID IT.** Begin exercise programs gradually and wear supportive shoes. **TREATMENT.** Stretch before exercising. If you experience heel pain, follow the RICE regimen: rest, ice, compression, and elevation. If that doesn't help, your podiatrist may recommend orthotic devices, steroid injections, anti-inflammatory medications, or surgery.

Toenail problems

WHAT IT IS. About 18% of Americans suffer from onychomycosis, a fungal infection of the toenail. Nails can become thick, discolored, loose, brittle, and painful. Feet exposed to a warm, dark, moist environment can get infected, but some people may be genetically predisposed to fungal nails. For those who are susceptible, the condition is highly contagious.

HOW TO AVOID IT. Keep your feet clean and dry, washing them at least once a day and drying the toes well. Make sure your shoes and socks stay dry, and change them daily. Wear socks that are either a natural/synthetic blend or wicking acrylic, which prevents moisture from becoming trapped against the skin. **TREATMENT.** A podiatrist debrides (cuts and thins) the infected nail, painlessly removing it if necessary, and prescribes medication.

Hammertoes

WHAT IT IS. With its distinctive profile—a bending at the first joint causes the toe to look like an upside-down “V” when viewed from the side—a hammertoe commonly is caused by increased tightening of the tendons and ligaments of the foot. This may lead to arthritic changes in the bone and joint that can become permanent and painful over time. Some people have a hereditary tendency to develop hammertoes, but they also may arise from a biomechanical deformity, such as a bunion. Hammertoes also are a symptom of rheumatoid arthritis. **HOW TO AVOID IT.** Avoid wearing shoes that are too tight or narrow in the toe box, as well as heels higher than 2 inches, which put pressure on the front of the foot. **TREATMENT.** Nonmedicated hammertoe pads, available over the counter, will decrease pressure on the affected area. If pain persists, a podiatrist can provide special padding, orthotics, or custom shoes. Surgery also is an option.

Corns and Calluses

WHAT IT IS. Many people have protective layers of compacted, dead skin cells that gather on bony areas of the foot. Corns are smaller and typically found over joints, while calluses develop on weight-bearing areas. Both are caused by friction and unnatural pressures. **HOW TO AVOID IT.** Wear shoes that give your toes enough room to move while supporting your foot without sliding or rubbing. **TREATMENT.** Over-the-counter protective pads cushion areas often rubbed by footwear. Be aware that products called “corn or callus removers” frequently contain harsh ingredients that can cause a chemical burn. A podiatrist can shave the corn or callus. In some cases, surgery is recommended to remove the deformity that is causing the problem. **IT STARTS WITH THE SHOES** Wearing the right shoes can prevent many foot ailments from developing. Some tips: **1.** Make sure they fit. Get your feet measured once a year. Size changes with age and hormone fluctuations. Try on shoes at the end of the day, when feet are at their largest. **2.** Make sure there’s enough space in the toe box—your toes need room to move. **3.** Shoes that are too narrow—or too wide—cause sliding and rubbing. That leads to blisters and calluses. **4.** Avoid heels higher than 2 inches. High heels increase pressure on the front of the foot. *Robin Ross is a doctor of podiatric medicine in Shelter Island, N.Y.*

© 2008 Dr. Robin Ross. Initially published in Parade Magazine. All rights reserved.

This material may not be edited, modified, abridged, retouched, cropped or otherwise altered in any manner, nor reproduced in any form without the expressed, written permission of Parade Magazine. <http://www.parade.com>