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Oh, Those Aching Feet!

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Active people put their feet to the test every time they exercise sometimes resulting in host of problems that range from a simple blister to a painful bout of heel pain (plantar fasciitis).

None of us should consider these injuries a normal part of the game. "Your feet shouldn't be painful", says Perry Julien, D.P.M., a podiatrist with the Atlanta Foot and Ankle Center. "But a lot of people accept foot pain instead of seeking out treatment". Ignoring even minor foot problems like blisters can have serious consequences. "You're going to start to compensate when you walk or run, and that can lead to knee problems, hip problems and back problems," says Carol Frey, M.D., an associate professor of orthopedic surgery at the University of Southern California. "If you let them go, they can become surgical problems."

The foot's design provides natural strength, flexibility and function. It contains 26 bones, 33 joints, more than 100 tendons, muscles and ligaments and numerous blood vessels and nerves. Its complex structure, when healthy, provides optimum balance, support and propulsion.

There are a number of foot ailments that can plague the general population. Exercisers suffer from more than the usual number of injuries and complaints because of the tremendous stress put on the feet. Experts say some of these injuries are especially prevalent among women. Frey says, "When designing women's footwear, shoe companies tend to take a male form (called a "last") and scale it down. The problem is women tend to have a narrower heel in proportion to the forefoot, whereas a typical male foot is more boxlike. So, when a shoe fit a woman's heel, it often cramps her toes. That, Frey says, is why 90 percent of bunion sufferers are women.

According to podiatrist Rob Donaldson, some types of feet are more prone to injury than others. Flat feet and high arches are problematic, especially for active populations. Low back pain, poor posture, knee problems, Achilles tendonitis, bunions, hammer toes and shin splints are often the byproduct of faulty foot mechanics.

Having good-quality, comfortable-fitting shoes, designed for your activity, are the first round of defense against foot pain.

With Donaldson's help, here is a list of some of the more common foot problems. Prevention and self-care are the first step in the treatment of foot pain. If pain persists, see a qualified podiatrist.

Athlete's Foot - Is an itching, burning sensation caused by a fungus that grows on the top layers of the skin. Some people are more susceptible to athlete's foot no matter what precautions they take. Try to keep the feet dry, especially between the toes, change your socks after your workout and wash the feet with an anti-bacterial soap. Talcum powder may help keep feet dry, but a health-care professional might recommend a more aggressive treatment. If you are prone to athlete's foot, go barefoot as much as possible, allowing the feet to breathe and the air to circulate around the foot.

Blisters - Are a very common, yet nagging foot problem caused by skin friction. The rubbing of soft skin against the hard surface of a shoe is sure to produce a few uncomfortable blisters. Donaldson warns athletes not to wear new shoes or cleats to a tournament, race or game. Instead, break them in slowly during practices or on short runs. Treatment for blisters is simple. Pierce the skin with a sterilized needle at its lowest point (where the least amount of fluid has accumulated) and let the fluid drain out naturally. Don't remove the skin. Place a thin Band-Aid over the blister until it heals.

Bunions - A bunion is a bump on the outside of the big toe joint caused by a partial dislocation of that joint. As the big toe starts to drift toward the smaller toes, the forefoot takes on a pointy-toe shape. Because of the bump, bunion sufferers have trouble fitting into many different types of shoes. Bunions hurt when a too tight shoe presses against the bump, inflaming the soft tissue surrounding the joint. (Bunion pain also can be caused by arthritis that may develop as the joints shift position). Bunions can lead to other problems, such as blisters or metatarsal stress fractures. When your big toe starts drifting, it no longer can bear its share of your body weight, and the burden shifts to your other toes. This is called transfer pain. In most cases, bunions (as well as corns and calluses) are caused by shoes that are too tight. Consequently, bunion pain can be relieved by wearing shoes with a wider toe box. But avoid athletic shoes that are too flexible in the toe. Custom-designed orthotics also can help by redistributing the force your foot bears with each step you take. A last resort is surgery, which typically involves cutting through the bone to realign the joint. You may be able to swim after a few weeks, but it typically takes six weeks before you're back in athletic shoes, and 12 weeks before you can work out on your feet. Swelling can last up to six months.

Plantar Warts - A swimmer's worst enemy, plantar warts grow inward on the bottom of the foot and can be extremely painful. Like all warts, the plantar wart is caused by a virus. Avoid going barefoot in public showers, locker rooms and on the pool deck. Buy a pair of pool shoes and keep them on, even in the shower stall. There are numerous over-the-counter products that successfully treat plantar warts. Still, some warts can be persistent. Consult with a health-care professional if your warts become chronic or won't go away with over-the-counter treatment.

Heel Pain (Plantar Fasciitis) - The plantar fascia runs under the foot from the bottom of the heel out to each toe and helps support the arch and acts as part of the shock-absorbing mechanism of the lower extremity. When the fascia becomes inflamed, heel pain sets in. Training errors, like a sudden increase in volume or intensity, can inflame the fascia. Usually it's a combination of pounding (such as with step aerobics or running), and

tightness in the calf muscles and Achilles' tendon. It is also common in sports that require a repetitive push-off motion, like tennis, basketball, soccer and gymnastics. When you're pounding, the plantar fascia can start to rip and shred off the heel bone. Discomfort is usually worse in the morning, when the fascia is tight. Typical treatment calls for rest, ice and anti-inflammatory medication as well as an arch support or heel cup when weight bearing. As after any injury, once the pain and inflammation subsides, strength and flexibility must be restored. Don't try to "run through" heel pain. Instead, while your injury heals, switch to a non-weight-bearing activity, such as swimming or biking. If the pain persists see a doctor.

When buying shoes:

- Buy shoes late in the afternoon, when your feet are largest. For the same reason, shop after a workout, not before.
- Get your feet measured by the sales clerk. Feet tend to get larger with age, and during and after pregnancy. In addition, one foot is often larger than the other, so buy shoes in the size that fits the bigger foot.
- Try on several pairs, focusing on fit, not appearance. Take the time to walk around the store in each pair. Make sure your toes aren't cramped.
- Women buying athletic shoes should ask if the shoe is made of a female last (the foot-like form over which the shoe is made). A female last should allow more room in the toes while fitting the heel relatively snugly.

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