

Script – Print – A real pain in the foot

Summer is in full swing, which means it's time to slip on those flip-flops and other comfortable shoes. But this seasonal wear can cause injuries and foot pain during this time of year, including plantar fasciitis. Plantar fasciitis (fashee-EYE-tiss) is one of the most common causes of pain on the bottom of the heel, according to the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons. It occurs when the plantar fascia, a strong band of tissue that supports the arch of your foot, becomes irritated.

"Plantar fasciitis is the inflammation from the bottom of your foot," says Ashley Gunlock, a physical therapist with OSF HealthCare. "If you're having sharp pain, especially in the morning, when you're not weight bearing and when you go to stand up for the first time and you have a sharp pain, that's a good indication that you probably have plantar fasciitis."

Plantar fasciitis is common, affecting one in 10 people at some point in their life. About two million people seek treatment for the pain and discomfort.

The most common symptom is a sharp pain in the bottom of the foot near the heel. Besides morning pain, it can occur after long periods of rest as well as after exercise or other activity.

"Plantar fasciitis may have several contributors," says Gunlock. "It can occur when somebody has mechanical inefficiencies, such as prior injury, poor body mechanics, or changes in their lifestyle, or from changes in their footwear. The tissues on the back of their legs and foot are getting excessive stress, so they're going to get inflamed. The other way is a common overuse injury. It can happen often with too much running or walking."

Plantar fasciitis is common among athletes, but it can happen to anyone. Gunlock treats many factory workers, for example, who stand or walk for several hours at a time.

"That prolonged pressure on your foot can inflame the fascia on the bottom of your foot or if they were off of work – if it's a seasonal job, so if they're off over the wintertime – and then they come back to that job in the beginning of the year we're going to get people coming in with that heel-bottom of the foot pain," Gunlock adds.

If you're experiencing foot pain, don't walk barefoot. Examine your shoes for signs of wear and tear and make sure your sandals or flip-flops have arch support. Gunlock says the reason shoes are helpful for people is because they unload the compression to the heel. Shoes with thick soles and extra cushioning can reduce pain with standing and walking.

Things you can try at home to relieve the pain include massaging the bottom of your foot, rolling your foot over a cold-water bottle or stretching the foot. If none of that provides any relief, it's probably time to seek a referral to a physical therapist. Surgery might also be necessary for some people if other factors are at play such as bone spurs.

"The first thing that I do is look at how their feet are on the ground barefoot, look at their foot posture to see the way the inflammation occurs which has a lot to do with the angle of the calcaneus, which is the heel bone," says Gunlock. "We look at the knees, look at the hips, see how the mechanics look with how you walk, how you move. That gives us a better idea which tissues are the issue. Sometimes the plantar fasciitis is caused by another muscle or overuse of another body part."

But by taking preventative 'steps,' Gunlock says patients can get back on their feet sooner rather than later.

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