

Feet are so vital to our well-being yet they are probably the most neglected parts of the body. Specialists believe that the most common structural problem suffered by the general population is excessive foot pronation. This means that your heel rolls inwards, lowering the arch of the foot and making your ankle bulge on the inside.

A biomechanical condition, it is often thought to be the common cause of many foot and leg injuries in walkers, runners and climbers. These include arch strain (*plantar fasciitis*), heel pain (*plantar calcaneal bursitis*), ball-of-foot pain (*metatarsalgia*), inner ankle pain (deltoid ligament strain) and shin splints (*tibialis posterior tendinitis*).

Excessive foot pronation can also cause the leg to rotate inwards too much, causing abnormal twisting forces within knee and hip.

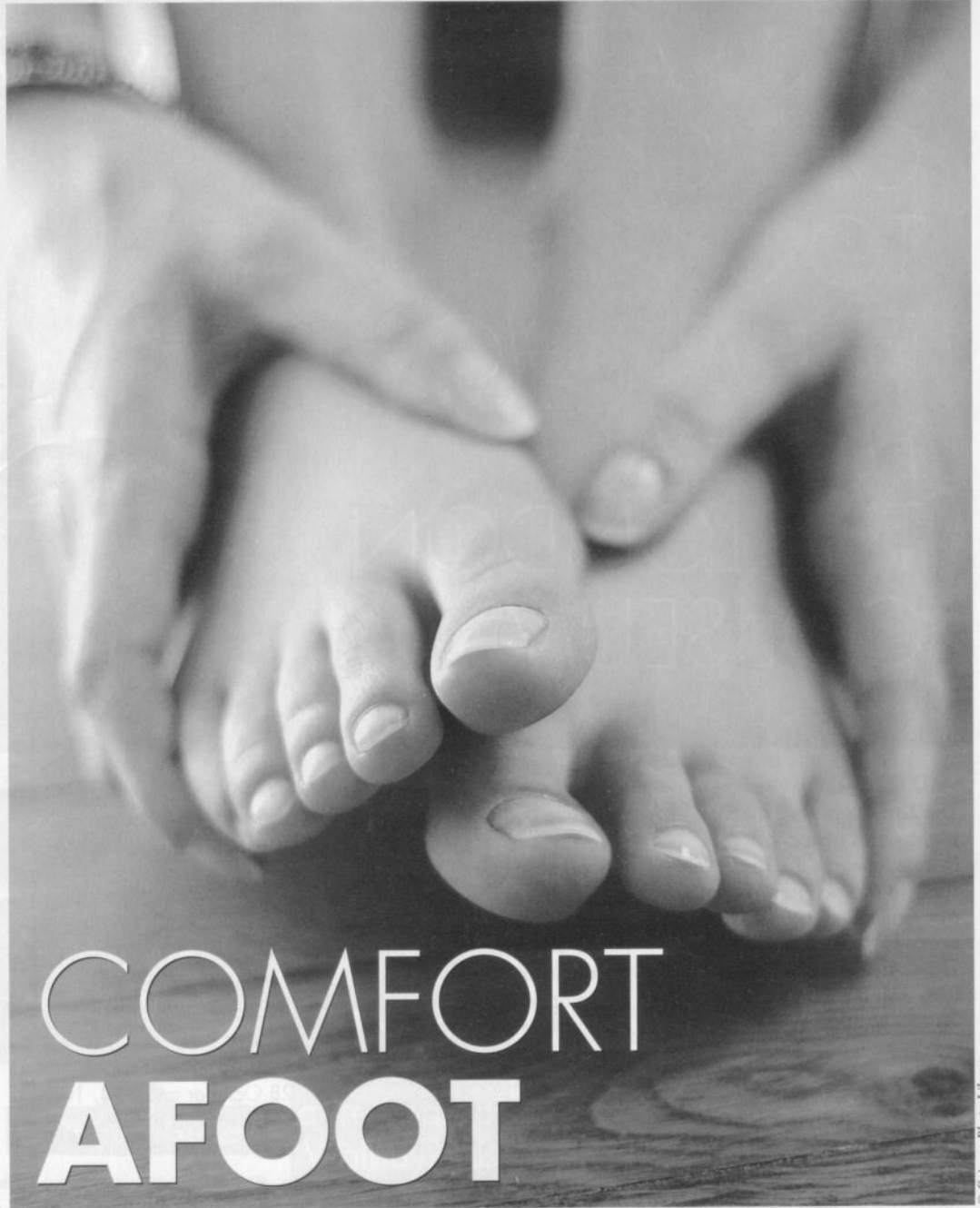
When you think that the foot is a masterpiece of engineering made up of 28 bones, 35 joints and more than 100 ligaments, it is amazing that more things do not go wrong.

Toes become deformed because pressures on the toe are stronger than their joints can resist. Joints can be weakened because of injury or arthritis and because of ill-fitting shoes.

Research shows that many people wear shoes that are too narrow and too short for their feet. You may think you know your shoe size, but you could be wrong. It could be worthwhile having your feet properly measured. With the wrong shoes, your toes could be "clawing" to try to keep them on (slip-on shoes); they could also be cramped because of tightness or get rubbed by loose shoes. Shoe problems can lead to knee and hip pains. If you are overweight, wearing tight, high-heeled shoes can cause a lot of foot discomfort.

Bunions, where the big toe is turned in and angled towards the second toe, causing a bump on the side, is due to a deformity of the joint at the base of the big toe called *hallux valgus*.

There may be an inherited tendency to weakness in this joint, or it could be because of arthritis; however, wearing tight or badly-fitting shoes



COMFORT AFOOT

If your feet are feeling uncomfortable, it could be time to see a podiatrist or chiropodist who can help readjust the way you walk, says **Arline Usden**

tends to make things worse.

Heel pain is a common complaint affecting many people. It is a nuisance and can become chronic but a podiatrist can help.

Podiatrists at Supplefeet say that heel pain has a gradual onset and is progressive over a few months. Typically, it starts in one heel only and is worse upon weight-bearing first thing in the morning. It generally eases with activity but becomes pronounced at the end of the day.

It is caused by an overpull of the tendon that attaches

into the calcaneum (heel bone).

This tendon is called the *plantar fascia*, and therefore inflammation of the tendon is called *plantar fasciitis*. It can also be accompanied by cramping of the calf muscles, as tightness of the Achilles tendon is a major contributory factor. The underlying position of your foot is often to blame and advice on shoes and insoles is important. A foot that flattens excessively on standing is called a pronating foot type and this needs to be addressed by using orthotics. Treatment may

consist of a regimen of calf muscle stretching exercises, provision of a special shock-absorbing insole, advice on footwear, perhaps ice water footbaths, taping and even a course of anti-inflammatory medication. Are you wearing too flat shoes, perhaps? Try shoes with a small heel or wedge to see if it helps.

If you can afford customised shoes, then those by Selve, above Paxton & Whitfield in London's Jermyn Street, will ensure comfort. Using a 3D digital scanner, each foot is measured from five points. You

FOOT AIDS IN THE SHOPS

Remember that you may need to buy shoes to fit the inserts rather than the other way round because your shoes may not have enough room to accommodate them.

- Scholl *Adjustable Gel Arch Supports* offer advanced cushioned support for flat feet and weak or fallen arches. A clear gel system with interchangeable inserts, they allow for different levels of support for optimum comfort. Green insert for light support, blue for medium and red for firm, £12.99.
- Scholl *Air-Pillo comfort half insoles*, £1.75, improve the fit of loose fitting shoes, providing cushioned comfort for the ball of the foot, preventing feet from slipping forward.
- Scholl's *Metatarsal Arch Supports*, £10.65, lift weakened metatarsal arches



to protect and relieve tenderness at the ball of the foot. Place matt side next to the foot and slip band over the toes. Adjust until each cushion is correctly positioned at the ball of the foot to give maximum relief.

- At Scholl shops and clinics, a podiatrist can fit orthotic inserts with minor adjustments to suit your feet. With the clinic appointment, these cost around £100. Made-to-measure orthotics cost more than £300.
- *Carnation Powerstep*, £22.99 from Superdrug, Lloyds and leading independent pharmacies, is a podiatry aid which provides arch support and a stabilising heel cradle with double-layered cushion insole covered in an antibacterial fabric. The design is based on the experience of a podiatrist creating and prescribing underfoot devices combined with extensive computer analysis of the average dimensions of thousands of pairs of feet. It is designed to stabilise and correct alignment and correct foot posture and mechanics. For further information, contact Carnation Footcare (0800-018 7117; or visit: www.powerstep.co.uk).

can choose colour and leather combinations, heel shape and height, lining colour and the sole of your choice. All sizes between an English size 2 and size 9.5 are catered for.

Your measurements and requirements are sent to Italy where your shoes are handmade by Italian craftspeople and delivered to you in 28 days. Prices of shoes range from £150, ankle boots from £235, knee-high boots from £325.

The advice to wear shoes that fit well and are roomy enough, and not to wear high-heeled, pointed or tight shoes, seems obvious. But, of course, fashion and comfort do not necessarily go together.

Ideally, the heel should have a broad base and its height should be no greater than four centimetres, says the Society of Chiropodists and Podiatrists. The heel counter – the portion of the shoe that grasps the heel of the foot at the sides and back, preventing the heel from sliding up and down while walking, stabilises or helps maintain the position of the heel when the shoe contacts the ground. As the heel counter softens or breaks down and loses its shape, the shoe becomes less supportive.

The shoe should have laces, or straps with buckles or Velcro to keep it in place. We keep slip-on shoes in place simply because they are too small for the foot in the first place, or by curling our toes. Determine your foot length from the tip of your longest toe. In many people, this is the second toe, not the big toe.

The correct length of a shoe can be determined by standing barefoot on a piece of thin cardboard and marking the place reached by the longest toe. When the cardboard is cut into a thin strip and inserted into a shoe, there should be one centimetre between the end of the cardboard and the heel of the shoe. The width should correspond with the widest part of the foot while standing. Many shoes come in a B fitting. If you want narrower or wider, you need to look for more specialised suppliers.

High heels throw the weight on to the ball of the foot, which may lead to calluses, bunions, corns and deformity. They also

push the centre of mass in the body forwards, causing the spine to bend backwards to compensate. This can lead to back problems. A narrow heel width can cause the ankle to become unstable, too.

The calf muscle may shorten and tighten and if you wear high heels every day for more than six months, it may cause the calf muscle to become shortened all the time and the body compensates by lowering the arch of the foot, or affecting the knee, hip or back.

Keep high heels for special occasions. Calf stretches help to keep your feet supple. Stand, facing a wall, with feet hip width apart and slightly bent at the knee. Take one step forwards, and using your arms to lean against the wall, keep your leg in front bent and the leg behind straight.

Both feet should be flat on the ground. Lean in towards the wall: as you do you should feel your muscles stretching in your calf and heel. Hold and slowly return to a standing position. Do this with each leg about five times. Vary your heel height from day to day.

If your feet are always hurting (and you have dealt with corns) it would be a good idea to see a podiatrist who is a specialist in biomechanics of the feet and who may prescribe an orthotic device.

Foot orthoses are devices (inserts) worn inside shoes that allow the foot to function better. Should you have them custom made (expensive) or off-the-shelf (less expensive)?

A report published in the American Orthopaedic Foot and Ankle Society's Journal following a study found there was no significant differences in the incidence of stress fractures, ankle sprains or other foot problems between the users of expensive, custom-made foot orthoses and those who used prefabricated orthotic devices.

- Contact the British Society of Chiropodists and Podiatrists (020-7234 8620; www.feetforlife.org) for more information and the address of a podiatrist in your area.
- Supplefoot, 13 Genotin Terrace, Enfield, Middlesex EN1 2AF (020-8367 9292; www.supplefoot.com).
- Selve, 1st Floor, 93 Jermyn Street, London SW1 6JE (020-7321 0200; www.selve.co.uk).

Keep high heels
for special
occasions only



The Lady

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