

WORDS_BRENT MCKEAN



HAPPY FEET

There's more to foot care than getting a pedicure. *Great Walks* looks at some common foot ailments and how to tackle them.

Athlete's foot (*tinea pedis*) is the world's most common skin infection, with the fungus affecting 70% of the world's population. However, like a lot of other common foot ailments once it's identified you can control it. Of course prevention is better than a cure so looking after your feet should stop the ailments happening in the first place.

"For walkers, most common foot ailments are a boot issue and this comes down to a lack of preparation before a walk," says podiatrist Andrew Bull of Sydney Sportsmed Clinic.

When talking about preparation it could be something as simple as cutting your toenails.

"People don't always cut them correctly," says Andrew. "If they're too long they can butt against the end of the shoe and the nail then jams back into the root tissue. You could then end up with a blood blister underneath the toenail. These sometimes need to be drilled and drained."

So, the point is to regularly cut your toenails – but not too short. Make sure when you cut them the corners are always outside of the skin or they'll jam inside when you start walking and cause ingrown toenails.

Wear and tear

Most of us some time or another will suffer from corns or calluses on our feet. They are wear points or shear points caused by too much movement inside the boot. Any place where the skin tends to rub creates a shearing force and the skin naturally toughens up.

"Calluses are there to protect you so they're not a bad thing," says Andrew. "But eventually if they get too thick they start to cause a burning feeling and that can get very uncomfortable."

Treatment involves relieving the pressure on the skin, usually by modifying the shoe. Pads to relieve the bony pressure are helpful, but they must be positioned carefully. On occasion, surgery is necessary to remove a bony prominence that causes the corn or callus.

"Calluses can also be a sign of something deeper," Andrew says. "If a certain joint is bearing too much weight and gets a bad callus on it, it's not just your skin that's bearing the weight, the joint itself can become inflamed and that may require a visit to a podiatrist when you may need a custom-made insole."

Train don't strain

Another common foot ailment is *plantar fasciitis*, which is when the arch of the foot becomes very sore. The *plantar fascia* is a long ligament at the sole of the foot and when it's pulled, excessively small fibrous tears can develop. This can happen if you have: boots that are unsupportive; extremely tight calf muscles; feet that naturally collapse too much; or you overload.

Short term treatments include elevating the heel inside the boot which helps take strain away from the affected area. But to avoid *plantar fasciitis*, Andrew says never increase your training by more than ten percent per week as your body takes time to adjust. If you go beyond breaking strain you'll get an injury.

Another *plantar fascia* injury is heel spurs which are fragments of bone that develop when the *plantar fascia* pulls away from the heel bone. This tugging effect causes calcium to build up in that area of the heel bone and a bony spur then develops, making the heel soft to walk on.

"The *plantar fascia* extending right along the arch can get very sore and it may require taping, an arch fill or a more supportive boot," says Andrew. "This is a common ailment for people whose calf muscles are too tight."

Other common foot ailments

ATHLETE'S FOOT: What is it? Athlete's foot (*tinea pedis*) is a fungus infection on the skin of feet. The fungus prefers moist, warm skin; this is why *tinea pedis* favours the folds between the toes.

What to do about it? To avoid it wear sandals in a public shower, always wash and dry your feet properly, and change your socks frequently. If you do get *tinea* a quick visit to a pharmacy for some medication should clear it up.



SOAK IT UP

Here are two recipes to make a smoothing post-walk foot soak at home.

EPSOM FOOT SOAK

- 1/4 cup Epsom salt
- 1/4 cup baking soda
- 10-12 drops essential oils

1. Mix the salt and soda, add in the oils, mix
2. Place in air tight glass jar. Store in a dark cool area
3. Use 2 tablespoons of foot soak with 2L of water

CITRUS FOOT SOAK

- 1/4 cup Epsom salts
- 1/4 cup baking soda
- 6 drops orange oil
- 6 drops lemon oil

1. Mix the salt and soda, add in the oils, mix
2. Place mixture in an airtight container
3. Use 2 tablespoons of foot soak with 2L of water

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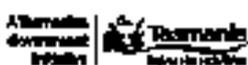


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Better posture

How you hold your body is very important to walking comfortably and easily. Following these eight steps will give you good posture, allow you to breathe easier and avoid back pain.

1. Stand up tall and straight
2. Don't arch your back
3. Don't lean forward or lean back. Leaning puts strain on the back muscles
4. Keep your eyes forward, not looking down but rather about 5m ahead
5. Keep your chin up. This reduces strain on neck and back
6. Shrug once and let your shoulders fall and relax
7. Suck in your stomach
8. Tuck in your bum and rotate your hip forward slightly. This will keep you from arching your back

Know your stride

Take more, smaller steps rather than lengthening your stride. Your stride should be longer behind your body, where your toe is pushing off, rather than out in front of your body. Your forward leg has no power, while your back leg is what's driving you forward. Getting the full power out of the push from the back leg as it rolls from heel to toe is the key to powerful, efficient walking. As for walking downhill or over rocks consider this: when you're standing still you've got half your body weight on each foot. When standing on one leg you've got all your weight on one foot. When walking quickly you have up to twice your body weight on each foot so walking downhill quickly is not advisable. Short and careful strides are the best way to walk downhill.



TEN TIPS FOR BETTER FOOT CARE

1. Walking footwear must provide sufficient cushion and support
2. Warm up before a long walk and cool down afterwards
3. Increase walking distance and speed in increments of no more than 10% a week
4. Wash feet thoroughly after a long walk
5. Keep toenails well clipped
6. Give feet a soothing soak every so often to relax the muscles (see break-out)
7. If you feel anything sore or a strain in your foot, stop and get it looked at
8. Strap your feet if they require more support
9. If you suffer from a foot ailment you may need a prescribed orthotic
10. Know your limits and follow a sensible program when you exercise



ACHILLES TENDONITIS: What is it? The Achilles tendon is the largest tendon in the body but it's also the most frequently ruptured. Like *plantar fasciitis* it's another common overuse injury where the tendon becomes inflamed. Symptoms include mild pain after exercise, some swelling or stiffness.

What to do about it? First and foremost rest. Take the weight off your feet, put some ice on the affected area and see an expert. Recovering from it will require easy stretching to loosen and strengthen the area.

HAMMERTOE: What is it? One or more toes permanently bent at the first joint often due to a muscle imbalance. This may cause corns and you could find it hard to wear shoes.

What to do about it? You may need shoes with a lot of toe room. If you're female you'll want to avoid high heels which will exacerbate the ailment. You can get special pads for your shoes but it's best to discuss this with an expert.

NEED TO KNOW

For more info on Sydney Sportsmed Clinic visit www.sydney-sportsmed.com.au or phone **02 9251 0822**.