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GUIDE TO HEALTHY LIVING

Wellness tips & expert advice to keep you and your family on track

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Keeping your feet healthy



Leonardo da Vinci once called the foot a “masterpiece of engineering and a work of art.” Leonardo’s observation still holds true today under the harsher light of modern science — the human foot is an immensely practical, beautifully designed structure built to bear many times its weight thousands of times a day and bounce back ready for more. It has the sophisticated construction of a suspension bridge and the stability of a marble pedestal. Although it’s one of the smaller parts of your body, the foot contains 28 bones. Together, your feet contain more than a quarter of all the bones in your body.

Jammed in a hot shoe all day, taking the brunt of your daily travels, the foot is often overlooked when it comes to health and fitness. But once it starts to hurt, it will quickly remind you of your neglect. Women’s feet, in particular, suffer from the stress and abuse of tight, high-heeled shoes, with the result that women are more likely than men to suffer from nearly all foot problems. Foot fitness can help you avoid disability later in life, keeping you active and engaged.

Many of the same things you do to maintain your overall health can also help your feet stay healthy. But two lifestyle factors stand out as particularly foot-healthy: maintaining a healthy weight and keeping your feet in good physical condition with stretching and exercise.

Healthy weight

Your weight plays a major role in your risk for many health problems: cardiovascular disease, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, diabetes, several forms of cancer, arthritis, gallstones, adult-onset asthma, infertility, sleep apnea and even snoring. So it should come as no surprise that excess weight can also contribute to certain foot problems, by adding to the pounding your feet take every day, and increasing the risk for atherosclerosis, poor circulation and diabetes. Many foot care specialists today ask about your height and weight, as well as other aspects of your health, before suggesting a therapy. If you are overweight or obese, you are likely to leave the doctor’s office not only with pain medication and instructions for stretching exercises, but also with some suggestions on how to take off some weight.

Foot fitness

Exercising your feet on a regular basis not only improves overall foot health but may also reduce your risk for injury. Walking is the best overall foot exercise. When you walk, you put your foot through its full range of motion, from the time your heel hits the ground until you lift off with your toes. Moreover, walking is one of the best forms of exercise for your entire body. It improves your cardiovascular health and can help your circulation, muscle tone and mood.

Basic steps to help prevent many foot problems

- Buy shoes that fit well, with low heels and plenty of room for your toes.
- Maintain a healthy weight. Excess weight increases the load on your feet and the risk of foot problems.
- Keep your feet clean and dry.
- Trim toenails straight across to avoid ingrown nails.
- Wear sandals or shower shoes in locker rooms or public swimming pools.
- Exercise your feet regularly.
- Protect the skin of your feet from the sun's harmful ultraviolet rays.
- Inspect the skin of your feet routinely for changes.

Before walking or doing any other exercise, take a few minutes to march in place as a warm-up. Then try some quick exercises to stretch and strengthen the muscles in your feet. Otherwise, your feet will suddenly bear the brunt of all that activity, especially with high-impact sports like tennis. Then hit the road— starting out slowly if it's the first time you've exercised in a while.

Aim for 20 minutes three times a week, walking at a comfortable pace. If that's too strenuous, try walking for 10 to 15 minutes. Gradually, pick up the pace so that after five to 10 minutes you can still talk but are breathing more heavily than usual. At this point, you are achieving aerobic benefits.

Here are some other hints to make your walk more pleasant and to protect your feet

- Make sure your shoes provide enough support but allow your feet to “breathe.”
- Walk with your head up and your back straight.
- Swing your arms freely.
- Start on level ground and work up to hills later. ■

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