

# Walking on Eggshells

If you're living with heel pain, the cause may not be what you think – and there could be an easy fix.

By Heather N. McCombs, DPM



Heel pain: this is the single most common reason people schedule an appointment to see a podiatrist. At some point in our lives, we will most likely all suffer from heel pain, but what exactly does that mean?

Heel pain can arise from several components, from a tight Achilles tendon or flat feet to pronation syndrome or plantar fasciitis to shin splints. All of these can be brought on by aging, weight gain, change in an exercise program or intensity, or even new shoe gear. However, when heel pain arises, one thing is certain: it can create discomfort ranging from a few sharp pains each day to chronic severe discomfort.

Flat feet are particularly prone to plantar fasciitis because the plantar fascia (the ligament on that connects the heel to the toes) is stressed more in a flat foot than in a foot with an arch. Sometimes people complain they've "lost their arches." It's essentially true: with normal aging, the tissues lose some of their resilience and don't support the arch as well, causing the person to walk with a more "flat footed" gait. As the arch falls and you continue your normal daily activities or begin new fitness programs or activities, the way your foot shifts your weight from the back to the front (pronation) is intensified. So without arch support your foot rolls too far, irritating the plantar fascia and causing you to overpronate with each step.

## What causes it?

Your heel, foot or sometimes even ankle hurts worse when you first get out of bed in the morning. This is because both your Achilles tendon and your plantar fascia tighten up as you sleep. When you're taking those first steps in the morning, the pain can be quite intense, but usually after walking around, it begins to feel better. You may also experience pain that's worse during and persists after exercise. This may be attributable to bunion pain – when you overpronate, the bunion you weren't aware of may flare up because you're putting more pressure on your big toe joint.

## What is a heel spur?

An x-ray may be prescribed for patients experiencing heel pain. Often the x-ray reveals a heel spur. As a patient, you may think the spur is the cause of the problem. In fact, plenty of people are walking around with heel spurs without pain. A spur is primarily an indicator that the condition of plantar fascia ligament inflammation has been present for long enough to cause microscopic bleeding, which in turn can look like a spur. More than 90 percent of these complaints respond well to conservative treatment and do not need any sort of surgery.

I treat my patients with a combination of anti-inflammatories, taping, injections, exercises and/or physical therapy to address the acute symptoms. Once it settles down, you do need to take preventative measures to prevent it from recurring; this is where orthotic use is important. This is an insert that supports the arch and blocks the tendency to overpronate. A good rule of thumb is that if you can bend the orthotic, it's probably useless; it won't support your arch because your body weight will compress it. Additionally, you don't always need a custom-made orthotic to solve the problem. These are often bulky and people stop using them because they don't fit into many of their shoes. There are over-the-counter alternatives that do a fantastic job.

Don't let the words "heel spur" scare you. Heel pain can be treated effectively, and with minimal changes, you'll be back on your feet soon.

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