

PLANTAR FASCIITIS: A COMMON SOURCE OF HEEL PAIN

By Dr. John A. Papa, DC, FCCP(R) - New Hamburg Wellness Centre

Plantar fasciitis is caused by injury to the plantar fascia, which is the tendon-like soft-tissue along the bottom of the foot that connects your heel bone to your toes. This condition is a common source of heel pain that can be quite disabling.

Plantar fasciitis usually develops gradually, but it can also come on suddenly. Sharp, knife-like pain on the inside-bottom part of the heel is often characteristic. Pain and discomfort can also extend into the arch of the foot. Heel pain tends to be worse with the first few walking steps in the morning, and after extended periods of sitting or inactivity. If plantar fasciitis becomes severe or chronic, heel and/or arch pain will be present with all weight-bearing activities, and may result in secondary areas of discomfort in the foot, knee, hip or back due to compensatory movements.



Under normal circumstances, your plantar fascia acts like a shock-absorbing rubber band, supporting the arch of your foot. Excessive tension and repetitive stretching can create small tears in this soft-tissue fascia, causing it to become irritated or inflamed. This may occur with activities that require running, jumping or prolonged walking and standing. Improper footwear can make the plantar fascia more susceptible to stretch and strain during these activities.

Faulty foot mechanics may also contribute to the development of plantar fasciitis. Individuals with flat feet or those who excessively pronate (roll feet inward) will experience added strain on their plantar fascia. Old lower extremity injuries such as ankle sprains and fractures can increase susceptibility due to altered lower limb movements. Being overweight is also a risk factor. Carrying extra pounds can break down the protective fatty tissue under the heel bone, causing heel pain and putting additional mechanical load on the plantar fascia.

Self-care strategies for reducing the pain of plantar fasciitis include: ice application; rolling a tennis ball or soup can from your heel and along the arch of your foot; and gentle stretching and strengthening of the achilles tendon, calf muscles, and plantar fascia. Gel or “donut pads” placed under the affected heel(s) in shoes may also provide relief.

Plantar fasciitis that does not respond to self-care strategies may require professional treatment. This can include electrotherapeutic or laser modalities to assist in healing, manual and soft tissue therapy to supporting structures, therapeutic taping of the heel, and specific rehabilitative exercises for the muscles and joints of the lower leg and foot. A custom made orthotic may also be helpful by minimizing pronation, cushioning the heel, and supporting the arch.



It is important to establish an accurate diagnosis of plantar fasciitis. Other causes of heel pain may include stress fractures, heel fat pad syndrome, achilles tendonitis/bursitis, arthritis, gout, or nerve irritation. If you are having difficulty with heel pain, a qualified health professional can determine the cause of your symptoms and prescribe appropriate therapy and rehabilitation strategies specifically for your circumstance. For more information, visit www.nhwc.ca.

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