

Weekend Doctor

By **DR. THOMAS F. VAIL**

After months wearing boots and thick-soled shoes, many are welcoming the warmer weather sporting flip-flop sandals. However, their popularity among teens and young adults is responsible for a growing epidemic of heel pain and foot deformities.

We are seeing more heel pain than ever in patients 15 to 25 years old, a group that usually doesn't have this problem. A major contributor is wearing flip-flops with paper-thin soles every day throughout the summer.

Flip-flops have no arch support and can accentuate any abnormal biomechanics in foot motion, and this eventually brings pain and inflammation.

Flip-flops also cause tension in the foot from the motion of lifting the heel away from the shoe surface, that flip-flop sound that you can't miss.

This tension, along with no arch support, brings on the type of heel pain caused by chronic inflammation of the connective tissue extending from the heel bone to the toes, the plantar fascia. This heel pain is also known as plantar fasciitis.

Plantar fasciitis pain is most noticeable after getting out of bed in the morning, and it tends to decrease after a few minutes and returns during the day as time on the feet increases.

Most patients with plantar fasciitis respond to conservative treatment within six weeks. This can consist of stretching exercises, night splints, padding and strapping of the foot, custom orthotics and anti-inflammatory medicines.

You should always make sure that you are actually getting a custom orthotic made from a three dimensional image of your foot, not the over-the-counter brands that just take an impression of the bottom of your foot. These types of orthotics will not give the necessary correction in the foot to bring it back into a neutral position so it supports the entire body. This is very important when it comes to alleviating the strain on the plantar fascia tendon.

I also see many patients with ankle sprains from the strain of wearing a non-supportive shoe like flip-flops.

Increased overuse injuries to the feet, and ankles in particular, can lead to more problems in the rest of your body including the knee, hip and back. If the foundation of your body, your feet, are not supported and in alignment, then the rest of your body will not be either.

Another common ailment in patients who wear flip-flops everyday is hammertoes.

The disfiguring condition is caused by the scrunching motion of your toes when you walk and leads to strain and deformity of the bones in the toes.

Beware wearing flip-flops while driving. They can become lodged under the gas pedal or brake or slip off while you're driving. Also, make sure you do not wear flip-flops while riding a bike. I had a patient lose a toe from colliding into a car while wearing flip-flops.

I advise wearing sandals with reasonably strong soles and arch support. Thicker-soled sandals with supportive arches might not be considered stylish for girls and young women. But if you want to wear sandals most of the time, you'll avoid heel pain and other foot deformities if you choose sturdier, perhaps less-fashionable, styles.



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