

Weekend Doctor

By DR. THOMAS F. VAIL

If your lower back has been hurting, and you don't remember doing anything to injure it, the source of your pain could be your feet.

Foot pain is something that many people try to ignore. After all, doesn't everyone's feet hurt now and then?

But if foot pain is something that has been with you for quite awhile, it could be causing problems in your ankles, knees, hips and even your back.

That old song, "The leg bone's connected to the thigh bone..." tells the whole story. Our bodies are like a chain, with one link, or bone, connecting at the joint to another link.

Think about what would happen if the first link in the chain was out of position. The point at which it meets the next link would eventually overstress that link and adversely affect the entire chain.

That's what happens when we have foot pain.

If the normal way of walking is painful, we instinctively change our walking pattern. Say you have arthritis, and your big toe joint hurts. You change your gait to avoid bending the joint when you walk.

Changing your gait changes the mechanics of your ankle joint, eventually causing ankle pain. This change in your walking pattern can also affect the whole chain of your lower body, from the ankle, to the knee, to the hip and then to the lower back.

When foot pain or a foot deformity causes you to change the way you walk, it changes the way the bones of all those other joints move with each other. Cartilage in the joints can wear down, ligaments and tendons can be stressed beyond their normal range and arthritis can set in.

A good way to check if your gait has changed is to check the wear pattern on your shoes. Here are some helpful hints:

- **Even wear:** If the treads on your shoes across the heel, and under the ball of the foot are both worn, with additional wear marks underneath the big toe, then this is a sign of a healthy stride.

- **Edge wear:** If your shoe has tread loss on the outside of the shoe and, in extreme instances, holes in the upper, this is a sign of a "supinator," or those who don't pronate or roll their ankles inward enough and strike the ground with the outside edges of their feet. High arches are a common cause of supination. This type of gait puts a lot of pressure on the leg and can cause stress fractures, especially in runners.

- **Heel wear:** Shoes that are worn in the heel down to the midsole show a person is overstriding when they walk. An overstride means that you walk with your feet too far in front of your body. Most of the rotation of the foot happens in the air and causes a lot of impact on the heel of the foot. Most walkers with this gait have plantar fasciitis or heel spur syndromes.

- **Heel and forefoot wear:** If there is significant wear in the heel extending to the ball of foot and big toe, then this is a sign of overpronation. People with flat arches and very flexible feet have this wear pattern. Custom orthotics are a very good option for this type of foot problem.

If your feet or ankles aren't working right, your shoes will probably be a great clue. Don't ignore them! Contact a foot and ankle specialist for an evaluation.

Caught early, most foot pain and deformities can be treated conservatively. Your back (and knees and hips) will thank you.



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