

Heal Your Heels - Put Your Best Foot Forward

By [Wendy Rose Gould](#), eHow Contributor

Leonardo da Vinci once proclaimed, "The human foot is a masterpiece of engineering and a work of art."

Clearly, the Renaissance man who gave us the Mona Lisa and contributed greatly to the sciences knew what he was talking about. From our toddler years to old age, our feet give us the ability to move about on our own, which was especially important before the invention of modern conveyances. They also can be fun to dress up with the season's hottest footwear trends.



Unfortunately, those footwear styles can take a nasty toll on our feet. From short-term annoyances, such as bunions and blisters, to long-term side effects, including bad posture and stressed joints, the wrong shoes can cause more than an urge to toss them into the nearest garbage can.

Foot Problems and Health Issues

Eighty-seven percent of women and 68 percent of men have suffered from painful footwear, according to the American Podiatric Medical Association. The associated pains and ailments derive from shoes that fail in the fit category.

The most common causes of problems are shoes that are too small, too narrow and lack support, according to Aaron Inch, an orthopedic and sports medicine physical therapist for 14 years.

"Shoes that are too small in length may contribute to toe deformities," warned Inch. "The toes are forced into a shortened position when shoe length is too short and may contribute deformities such as hammer toe, claw toe or mallet toe."

If the toe compartment is too small, Inch explained, toes are compressed, affecting the nerves, toenails and skin. This can lead to painful calluses, bunions, ingrown toenails, pinched nerves and blisters.

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— Dr. Catherine Cheung, podiatrist and foot surgeon

A prolonged period without arch support can also lead to problems such as plantar fasciitis, a painful irritation and swelling of foot tissue.

Health issues caused by improper footwear may extend well beyond the feet. "Footwear with poor shock absorption results in excessive force being placed up through the lower leg" and "transmitted into the knees, hips, and spine," Inch said. "This can contribute to progressive degenerative joint disorders and disc-related issues in the spine."



Choosing Comfortable Kicks

From cramming our delicate toes into tiny points to sports shoes that provide zero support, you would think that we had it in for our feet. The American Podiatric Medical Association said that eight out of 10 Americans have experienced foot problems as a direct result of their shoe choices.

Fortunately, you might not have to forfeit style for comfort. You may often have the best of both worlds by wearing properly fitted shoes made out of durable materials.

"People should primarily focus on the fit of the shoes and make sure that their feet are adequately supported," recommended Dr. Catherine Cheung, a San Francisco podiatrist and foot surgeon.

A well-fitting shoe supports the arch, cushions the heel and doesn't squish your toes, said Cheung. That goes for sneakers, flats, heels, boots and any other close-toed shoes.

"Heels should fit snugly and not slip or slide freely inside the shoe," said Tina Aldatz, a certified pedorthist---a specialist in using shoes and inserts to solve problems in the feet and lower limbs. Slipping and sliding may cause blisters and calluses. Aldatz founded Foot Petals, a company that makes and markets designer-shoe cushions.

The shoe should also provide 3/8 inch to 1/2 inch of space in front of your longest toe and not feel tight anywhere. It is better to go up a size and add cushioning than to squeeze your feet into shoes that are too small, advised Aldatz.

Adding Extra Comfort

The next step toward foot comfort is padded inserts, which may relieve your heels, provide additional support for your arches and ensure that your shoes fit as they should.

Many types of shoe inserts are available over the counter. These products are designed for heels, arches, the ball of the foot and the full foot.

"Heat-molded inserts are the most cost-effective and supportive adaptation to a shoe," said Inch. "(They) combine adequate shock absorption with support to the arch of the foot.

"Unlike a low-profile padded sock liner that will compress easily and no longer provide support to the foot, a heat-molded insert will continue to provide adequate support to the foot long after it is molded to the foot," he added.

Traditional inserts don't always work with some styles of shoes, such as heels, strappy sandals and ballet flats. Look for specialty products, including foam strips that attach to shoe straps and relieve tension, full insoles made for open-toed shoes, and heavy ball-of-foot cushions that provide comfort for sky-high heels.

Minimizing Stinky Feet

Nothing is worse than getting a whiff of smelly feet, especially when you know you're the culprit. While some shoes are simply a lost cause and deserve a trip to the trash can, others can be salvaged. You can also take steps that will keep your kicks smelling fresher for longer.

Always wear socks, said podiatrist Catherine Cheung. Not only do socks help prevent blisters, calluses and other unsightly or painful ailments, they absorb sweat. Make sure to put on a clean pair every time you slip into your shoes, whether you're wearing heels, flats or sneakers. From thick, athletic socks to thin and discreet hose-like slip-ons, there's always a sock option available for your footwear.

An additional way to combat stinky feet is to dry your shoes out after they're worn. Though you may have a tendency to toss them into the closet after a long day, it's important to give them ample time to dry out. Shoes often get hot and wet throughout the day, so set them in an open environment that has access to airflow, Cheung said.