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FOOT PAIN

How to fix — and prevent —
common heel ailment plantar fasciitis / D1

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Life & Health

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Plantar fasciitis

WHAT IS IT?

Plantar means bottom of the foot. The fascia is the thick fibrous band at the bottom of the foot that connects the ball to the heel. Plantar fasciitis is an inflammation of the fascia, which maintains the arch in the foot and cushions shock. It is not a heel spur, although one may form because of plantar fasciitis.

CAUSES

- Excess stress in the bottom of the foot. Usually not from an injury.
- Having feet that "overpronate," which means the foot rolls too far inward.
- High arches can be a cause. So can low arches or flat feet.

How high is your arch?



Normal

Too high

Too low

TELLTALE SIGNS

- Pain in one heel that feels like an internal bruise.
- Often hurts first thing in the morning or when getting up after resting or sitting for a long time.
- May feel achy at night.
- Usually affects only one heel, but could later strike the other foot.

WHO GETS IT

- All ages.
- Weekend warriors who don't warm up.
- Overweight and pregnant women putting new stress on their feet.
- Athletes, hikers, runners, dog-walkers.
- Sculptors, factory workers, hair-cutters, dental hygienists, anyone who stands a lot in their job.

What NOT to wear

- Old, tired shoes that have lost their support.



HOW TO YOU FIX IT

Conventional treatment

- Time, patience, rest.
- Icing the heel and arch.
- Exercising the foot, such as rolling a ball around with your toes.
- Physical therapy.
- Over-the-counter orthotics or inserts, available at sport shoe stores. Cost: around \$35.

It's a foot problem called plantar fasciitis, and when you have it, you know it

HURT & SOLE

By SUSAN SWARTZ
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THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

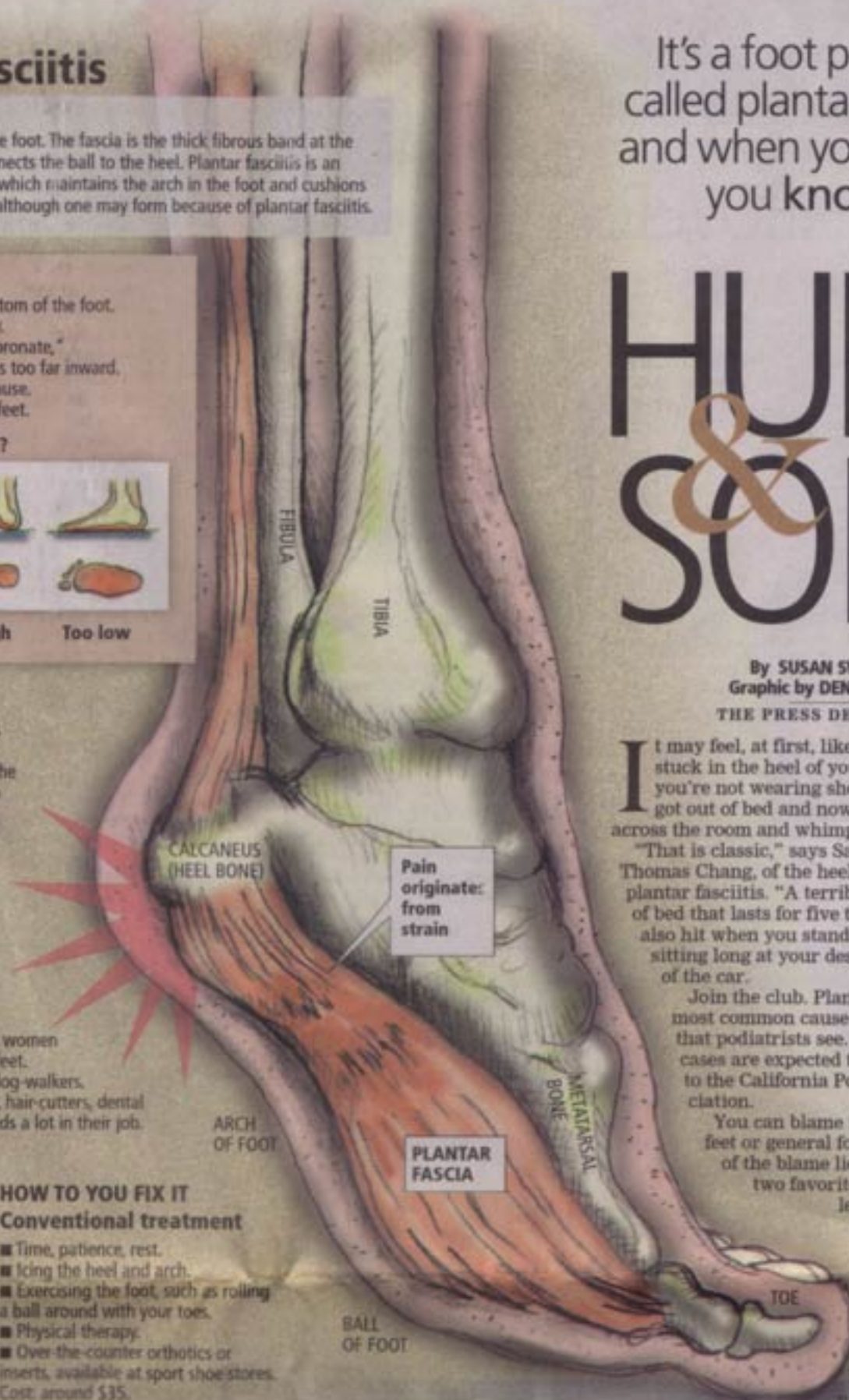
It may feel, at first, like you've got a pebble stuck in the heel of your shoe, except you're not wearing shoes. In fact you just got out of bed and now you're hobbling across the room and whimpering.

"That is classic," says Santa Rosa podiatrist Thomas Chang, of the heel ailment known as plantar fasciitis. "A terrible pain when you get out of bed that lasts for five to 10 minutes." It can also hit when you stand up after resting or sitting long at your desk or even getting out of the car.

Join the club. Plantar fasciitis is the most common cause of heel complaints that podiatrists see. About 1 million new cases are expected this year, according to the California Podiatric Medical Association.

You can blame it on bad shoes, aging feet or general foot abuse. But much of the blame lies with America's two favorite pastimes — reckless eating and exercising.

Chang, who teaches at the California College of Podiatric Medicine, believes there's been a "heel pain epidemic over



FEET: Ligament isn't very flexible and can swell, overstretch

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the last 20 years" which he blames on "people eating more and exercising more."

Pounds part of problem

Increased weight puts added pressure on your feet, particularly to the plantar fascia, that long ligament running from the ball of the foot to the heel whose job is to support the foot structure, absorb shock and maintain the arch. The ligament is not real flexible, so when there's excess pressure it resists.

That causes the ligament to overstretch and swell. If the foot flattens too little, the fascia starts to hurt from being pulled too tight.

The same thing can strike a person who decides to suddenly become a jock — without warming up or wearing proper shoes.

"When you run, you put four times as much stress on your foot as when you walk," said Chang, noting that heel pain is often a complaint of weekend warriors — "people who have never done any real exercise, let alone stretch. They get these great shoes for Christmas and make a New Year's resolution to get fit, and by February and March they're coming in."

Sometimes it's a pain that comes and goes and comes again.

"Sometimes people can't walk at all, it's so bad," said Chang.

Delores Francisco, 65, of Santa Rosa knows just what Chang is talking about. "One morning," she said, "my left foot ached so badly I could barely walk to the bathroom."

Justin Braider, 40, of Lakeport described his as "blinding white pain."

Don't despair

The good news is that plantar fasciitis is fixable. The initial strategy, said Chang, is to "calm the inflammation and support the foot." Some patients are back on their feet in a month. Other cases take eight months to a year or more. The variety of treatment ranges from simple stretching



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CHRISTINE DOBROWOLSKI, Eureka podiatrist

exercises and anti-inflammatory drugs to wearing night splints to keep the foot from tightening. Major sufferers may require sound wave treatment, similar to what's used in kidney stones, to break down the inflammation, or surgery in which the fascia is partially cut to release tension.

Francisco was able to get back to her morning walks and camping trips after taking cortisone shots and being fitted with special shoe inserts called orthotics.

Braider went all the way to surgery, but his was an extreme case.

"I have an unusually high instep, and mine was getting so stretched," he recalled.

A first attack of plantar fasciitis was relieved with cortisone. A year later he decided to get fit and started out by playing "two hours of solid, frenetic racquetball. The pain came back with a blind fury."

Repeated cortisone shots did nothing this time, and Braider was referred to Chang.

He had surgery, followed by months of physical therapy and now says, "I'm almost back to a time in my life when I didn't know the words plantar fasciitis."

He's also lost weight, gets his exercise playing with his kids and never dons a shoe without his orthotic inserts.

Surgery is rarely necessary, in perhaps 5 percent of cases, said Chang, who recently published a physicians' text on foot and ankle surgery.

"If I see 20 patients in one day with heel problems, not more than one will need surgery," Chang said. What most plantar fasciitis patients end up with is some form of orthotics or shoe insert.

Shopping for orthotics

Generic ones available from sport shoe stores cost around \$35. Customized orthotics, made from a mold of the person's foot, can cost \$300 to \$800. Chang said often, in mild cases, the generic inserts do the trick, but added, "Not every size 8 has the same weight and the same foot shape." Custom molded inserts fit the individual foot perfectly and, he said, are often necessary "to control the motion that is creating the problem." As for the highly advertised gel pads and other drugstore remedies, most doctors say they give some comfort to sore feet but don't correct this particular problem.

"They're cushiony, but they don't do a thing for plantar fasciitis," said Christine Dobrowolski, a podiatrist in Eureka who wrote the book "Those Aching Feet," which has made her a national source for magazine stories on bad feet.

"I think most people are embarrassed to talk about their feet," Dobrowolski said. "Women will talk about their shoes but not their feet. They think that aching feet are normal. That's part of the problem."

She's had patients who've waited more than a year before finally limping into her office.

Supportive shoes

The first thing she stresses is the need for good supportive shoes. Anyone who wants to prevent an attack or recurrence of plantar fasciitis shouldn't be wearing shoes that don't keep the foot from moving around. That includes flip flops and those cute flats you see in spring fashion displays. Going barefoot is just as bad.

Dobrowolski favors clogs with a small heel, "something

that bends only at the toe." High heels and even cowboy boots are hard on the feet, as well, although they tend to put added pressure more on the balls of the feet, by jamming the foot forward.

Running and walking shoes are not automatically good for you, either.

"The newer style of athletic shoes are lighter weight and they are not as supportive or flexible," said Dobrowolski. "In three months, the shoe is breaking down."

Her test for a foot-friendly shoe is to try to bend it in half.

"It might look like it has good support, but if you can fold it like a sandwich, it doesn't," Dobrowolski said even well-made shoes can last only so long. Six months is what she gives most shoes used in cross training or for marathon-style runners.

"If you're on a stationary bike, they may last a year. People don't realize that the midsole and the shank wear down. Shoes take a pounding, even on a treadmill. If you can fold it, it's time to trade for a new pair."

At 34, Jason Holcombe of Eureka is an experienced runner. He thought it was time for new shoes when he started feeling pain last spring. "The bottom of my foot started to hurt in front of my heel."

He tried new shoes and went out again two days later. "I was a mile into it, and I simply couldn't run."

He discovered that his arch had fallen, probably from running on city streets. His remedy was 12 weeks of physical therapy, which included stretching exercises and customized orthotics.

It took about four months before he could get back out and jog, although he was able to join his running club by riding his bicycle. In the meantime, two of his running buddies started complaining that their heels hurt when they got out of bed in the morning.

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