

Plantar Fasciitis

What is plantar fasciitis?

Plantar fasciitis is caused by inflammation of the plantar fascia which is a strong band of tissue (like a ligament) that stretches from your heel to your middle foot bones. It supports the arch of your foot and also acts as a shock-absorber in your foot. Often people with this problem have a flat foot ie. loss of the instep (long arch of the foot).

What causes plantar fasciitis?

Repeated small injuries to the fascia (with or without inflammation) are thought to be the cause of plantar fasciitis. The injury is usually near to where the plantar fascia attaches to your heel bone.

You are more likely to injure your plantar fascia in certain situations.

For example:

- If you are on your feet for a lot of the time, or if you do lots of walking, running, standing, etc, when you are not used to it. If you start exercising on a hard surface eg on the road instead of a track.
- You are more prone to plantar fasciitis where you have a sedentary lifestyle, wearing shoes with poor cushioning or poor arch support or if you are overweight, (which will put extra strain on your heel).
- If you have a tight Achilles tendon (the big tendon at the bottom of your calf muscles above your heel). This can affect your ability to flex your ankle and make you more likely to damage your plantar fascia.

Often there is no apparent cause for plantar fasciitis, particularly in older people. A common wrong belief is that the pain is due to a bony growth or 'spur' coming from the heel bone (calcaneum). Many people have a bony spur of the heel bone but not everyone with this gets plantar fasciitis.

How common is plantar fasciitis?

Plantar fasciitis is common. Around 1 in 10 people will get plantar fasciitis at some time in their life. It is most common in people between the ages of 40 to 60 years. However, it can occur at any age. It is twice as common in women.

What are the symptoms of plantar fasciitis?

Pain is the main symptom. This can be anywhere on the underside of your heel. However, commonly, one spot is found as the main source of pain. This is often about 4 cms forward from your heel, and may be tender to touch.

The pain is often worst when you take your first steps on getting up in the morning, or after long periods of rest where no weight is placed on your foot. Gentle exercise may ease things a little as the day goes by, but a long walk or being on your feet for a long time often makes the pain worse. Resting your foot usually eases the pain.

Sudden stretching of the sole of your foot may make the pain worse. For example, walking up stairs or on tip-toes. You may limp because of pain. Some people have plantar fasciitis in both feet at the same time.

What is the initial treatment for plantar fasciitis?

Usually, the pain will ease in time. 'Fascia' tissue, like 'ligament' tissue, heals quite slowly. It may take several months or more to go. However, the following treatments may help to speed recovery:

Rest your foot as much as possible. Avoid running, excess walking or standing, and undue stretching of your sole. Gentle walking and exercises described below are fine. Do not walk barefoot on hard surfaces. Choose **shoes with cushioned heels and a good arch support**. A laced sports shoe rather than open sandals is probably best. Avoid old or worn shoes that may not give a good cushion to your heel.

You can buy various **heel pads** and shoe inserts to cushion the heel and support the arch of your foot. These work best if you put them in your shoes at all times. The aim is to raise your heel by about 1 cm. If your heel is tender, cut a small hole in the heel pad at the site of the tender spot, so the it will not touch anything inside your shoe. Place the inserts/pads in both shoes, even if you only have pain in one foot.

Painkillers/anti-inflammatory medication as advised by your GP or pharmacist.

An **ice pack** (such as a bag of frozen peas wrapped in a damp tea towel) and held to your foot for 15-20 minutes may also help to relieve pain.

Regular, gentle stretching exercises (attached) of your Achilles tendon and plantar fascia may help to ease your symptoms. This is because most people with plantar fasciitis have a slight tightness of their Achilles tendon. If this is the case, it tends to pull at the back of your heel and has a knock-on effect of keeping your plantar fascia tight. Also, when you are asleep overnight, your plantar fascia tends to tighten up (which is why it is usually most painful first thing in the morning). The aim of these exercises is to loosen up the tendons and fascia gently above and below your heel.

What is the prognosis (outlook) for plantar fasciitis?

Most people have completely recovered from an episode of plantar fasciitis within a year. However, some of the treatments described above may help to speed up your recovery. To prevent it is coming back:

- Wear shoes with good cushioning in the heels and good arch support.
- Regularly changing trainers used for running or walking
- Losing weight if you are overweight.
- Regularly stretching the plantar fascia and Achilles tendon (see Exercises attached), especially before exercise.
- Avoiding exercising on hard surfaces.

Title: Plantar fasciitis
Review date: 21.11.17
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Version No: 1
First Published: 21.11.12