



What is it?

Plantar fasciitis means inflammation of a structure called plantar fascia. The plantar fascia is a strong band of tissue (similar to a ligament) that stretches from the heel to the mid foot. It supports the arch of the foot.

Symptoms

Pain is the main symptom. This can be anywhere on the underside of the heel. Commonly one spot is found as the main source of pain and may be tender to touch. The pain usually eases on resting the foot, but is often worst when first used in the morning. Gentle exercise may then ease things a little as the day goes by, but a long walk often makes the pain worse. Sudden stretching of the sole of the foot may make the pain worse, for example, walking up stairs or on tip-toes.

What causes it?

Plantar fasciitis is quite common. It mainly affects people over 40 and is more common in women. It is also common in athletes. Situations where it is more likely include the following.

- If you do lots of walking, running, standing, etc, when you are not used to it.
- Wearing shoes with poor cushioning and/or support.
- Sudden gains in weight or being overweight will put extra strain on the heel.
- Overuse or sudden stretching of the sole. For example: athletes who increase their running intensity or distance; poor technique starting 'off the blocks'; etc.
- Tightness of the Achilles tendon (at the bottom of the calf muscles above the heel).

Often there is no apparent cause, 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. Many people have a bony spur of the heel bone but this is not usually the cause of the pain.

What should you do?

It may take several months or more but usually the inflammation and pain will ease with time. Your Physiotherapist or Podiatrist will help you with your treatment however the following:

- Rest or reduce running, excess walking or standing, and undue stretching of the sole
- Footwear. 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 best.
- Heel pads. You can buy various pads and shoe inserts to cushion the heel. These work best if you put them in your shoes at all times.
- Painkillers and anti-inflammatory medicines such as paracetamol and ibuprofen may be useful. Some people find that rubbing a cream or gel onto the heel that contains an anti-inflammatory medicine is helpful. Any medication that you take should be discussed with your GP or pharmacist.
- Exercises. Regular gentle stretching will help ease the symptoms. This is because most people with plantar fasciitis have a slight tightness of the Achilles tendon. Also, when you are sleep overnight, the plantar fascia tends to tighten up (which is why it is usually most painful first thing in the morning). The exercises on the following page may help.

Continued...

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Stretches:

1. Stand 2-3 feet away from a wall. Keeping the knees straight and feet and heels on the ground, lean onto the wall. You should feel the calf muscles and the Achilles tendon tighten. Keep this position for several seconds then relax. Do this about 10 times. Repeat this routine five or six times a day.
2. Sit in a chair with the knees bent at right angles and the feet and heels flat on the floor. Now lift the foot upwards with the heel kept on the floor. Again you should feel the calf muscles and Achilles tendon tighten. Again, keep the position for several seconds then relax. Again, do about 10 times, five or six times a day.

*Symptoms can persist for a prolonged period of time and rarely surgery is required if you fail to other treatment.

Other causes of heel pain

Plantar fasciitis is a common cause of heel pain yet there are other structures around the heel which may be responsible for your symptoms such as:

- Fat pad: This structure provides natural shock absorption for your heel
- Nerves in the area can become sensitized
- Bone - the bone can be irritated due to an injury or overuse.
- Bursa – a fluid filled sack which normally reduces friction between tendons and bone, this can become irritated and produce pain. Generally this will be felt at the back of the heel, and not underneath.
- Soft- tissue growth (more common in adolescents)

Treatment for these conditions will be similar to plantar fasciitis and the clinician you are seeing can give you specific advice for your problem.

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