

The New York Times

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NEW YORK, SUNDAY, OCTOBER 5, 1997

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No. 50,936

If the Pain Persists See Your Podiatrist

By CHARLES STRUM

Chances are, you are mean to your feet. Perhaps not intentionally. But think about it: your feet bear a huge burden — you. And what have you done for them lately?

The answer, probably, is not much, except to stuff them into shoes that hurt or don't fit or are, in the case of some teen-agers, unlaced.

On the other hand, what have your feet done for you? Plenty. From playpen to playground, from ball field to the running track. Walking the dog, running to catch a train, climbing stairs, jogging, tennis, softball or just standing by the water cooler. Not to mention kicking it in frustration.

That's why, eventually, your feet may take you to the office of someone like Dr. Richard Braver, a sports podiatrist, who tends to see people with problems that cannot be cured by simply rubbing sore feet at bedtime.

"The foot is the part of the body that's always being used," he said the other day from his office in Englewood. "The foot is always in motion. It's obviously very complex. You know that line about the shin bone connected to the leg bone? Well, it's the shin, the leg, the hips. The pain in your back may be directly related to the pain in your foot."

From infancy to old age, the foot takes a beating, and early on it needs watching. The feet of young children are highly flexible, the bones still forming. The notion that the first real shoes should be hard-soled oxfords — remember lots of little kids walking around stiff legged, like robots? — has long since been replaced with the theory that more flexible footwear, like sneakers, is preferable.

So you're off to a good start. But there's still a lot that could go wrong: flat feet, pigeon toes, knock knees, hips out of alignment. Any and all of these problems can put stress on the muscles and bones of the leg. The result could be sprains, strains, fractures or, down the road, wear-and-tear arthritis, Dr. Braver said.

As children grow, he said, they may complain of aches and pains in the joints or shins, a possible sign that the bones are growing faster than the muscles. It's a condition often referred to as growing pains, and in the extreme the muscles can pull away from the bone.

Bones don't stop growing until about 15 or 16, he said, and if joint pain persists the possibility of a misalignment should be considered, especially in girls.

"Girls have wider hips, which can cause knock knees, Dr. Braver said. "It's something to look at as they get more active and start complaining of strains at the ankles or knees."

The problem can be subtle, he cautioned. "If it doesn't go away within a week's time you should have it checked by a pediatric orthopedist or a sports podiatrist," he said.

All these things add up and can take their toll later on. In fact, they led to Dr. Braver's career choice.

At 38, Dr. Braver is an avid jogger who runs 3 to 5 miles four times a week. But in high school and college he was a lot tougher on himself. He was captain of the track team at Pascack Valley High School and later at American University in Washington, running the mile in 4:07.

"I was helped by a podiatrist in college," he said. "I had a stress fracture of my left leg," because of a fallen arch. As a result, the muscles pulled away from the bone, causing a fracture. Arch supports helped, in his case.

But as we age, and as we ignore our feet even more, damage inevitably occurs or is compounded by neglect.

After high school or college, we enter the world of work. And suddenly people who have been wearing sneakers since childhood are wearing shoes for business.

"They come down with a whole slew of ailments," he said. "Corns on the tops of their toes, bunions, strains to their arches for standing for long periods. Now we have to think of allowing a person to function in a dress shoe."

Manufacturers are recognizing the need for more flexible business shoes. And the recent style preference for boxier (and roomier) shoes, like Doc Martens, has actually had a salutary effect on some feet, Dr. Braver. But that solves only part of the problem.

The more sedentary nature of the work week gives way to the pursuit of leisure time recreation and the proliferation of the weekend warrior — another opportunity to insult the long-suffering foot.

Enter the unprepared part-time athlete who won't warm up before exercising or move gradually into a new sport or activity.

In recent year, Dr. Braver pointed out, middle age has expanded considerably, probably into the 60's for many people. And while heat and ice and massage and even personal trainers are available to soothe or ameliorate foot or leg pain and damage, we begin more and more to rely on the medicine cabinet for relief, something the doctor warns against.

By late middle age and beyond, all the abuses of the earlier years begin to take their toll, and the bones become more brittle.

"Older people are set in their ways," Dr. Braver said, "and in the shoes they want to wear. They're not accustomed to sneakers. They come in with leather soled shoes which are very stiff. And they wonder why they have foot pain."



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