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Plantar Fasciitis

Your *plantar fascia*, the thick band of tissue that connects your heel to the base of your toes, can get torn, inflamed or overstretched during running. You often will feel the pain at the base of your heel when you step out of bed in the morning. This injury can be very pesky; it can prevent you from running for weeks, sometimes months.

Best new alternative remedy: In one study, acupuncture reduced pain for 18 people who had been unable to recover from plantar fasciitis for a year. At first, practitioners needed traditional meridian points. When some runners didn't respond, the acupuncturists focused on trigger points in the runners' calves and arches. This reduced pain completely within six weeks. Experts aren't sure why acupuncture heals, but some believe it signals your brain to release pain-soothing chemicals. For a list of practitioners in your state, call the American Academy of Medical Acupuncture in Los Angeles at (800) 521-2262, or check the Academy's Web site at www.medicalacupuncture.org.

Best new mainstream treatment: Stretching your calves and Achilles tendon in multiple directions will release pressure on your plantar fascia, says physical therapist and chiropractic doctor Gary Mascilak, who treats runners in Sparta, N.J. Here's how to do it:

1. Get in the push-against-the-wall position, with one foot about 24 inches in front of the other and your palms against the wall.

2. Slowly lean forward while pressing the heel of your rear foot into the ground. Keep your toes pointed forward and your back knee straight. Curl your toes to accentuate your arch as you shift your weight to the outside of your rear foot. Alternate between this curled-toe position and the starting position for 30 seconds.

3. While still pushing against the wall, bend your rear knee until you feel your heel wanting to rise off the floor. Again curl your toes to accentuate your arch, putting your weight on the outside of your foot. Alternate back and forth between the curled-toe and starting position for 30 seconds. Repeat the entire sequence as often as possible.

Try this also:

- See a sports medicine specialist for orthotics, which work within six weeks for most runners, says Rick Braver, D.P.M., a podiatrist in Englewood and Fair Lawn, N.J.

- Before you get out of bed, wrap a towel around your toes and gently pull them toward you. Do this with your knees straight as well as bent.

- See a physical therapist, podiatrist or chiropractor for ultrasound treatments to break up scar tissue and encourage healing.

- Ask your podiatrist or physical therapist for a night splint, a device that you wear on your foot while you sleep. This keeps your Achilles tendon and plantar fascia in a lightly stretched position.

- Massage your arch often by sitting on a chair and rolling a marble, a frozen soda bottle or another massage device under your foot. Progress to a standing position.

RUNNERS WORLD

Get pushy: To target a tight and often neglected muscle, try curling your toes (below) when you do the push-against-the-wall stretch (with your shoes on or off).

