

Try This 12-Minute Workout to Keep Your Feet Strong

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Foot pain affects 13% to 36% of adults globally, with women being more susceptible than men. Walking exerts four to six times your body weight on feet, while running increases this to 11 times
- › Healthy feet are crucial for physical and mental well-being. Untreated foot pain can lead to locomotor disability, impaired balance, increased fall risk and loss of independence
- › There are three simple at-home tests to gauge foot health – toe dexterity, toe strength and weight distribution. A 12-minute feet workout featured below can also help strengthen your feet
- › Wearing improper footwear can lead to foot pathologies. In contrast, key components to look for in proper footwear include a heel counter, arch support, flexible midfoot, proper heel lift and wide toe box
- › Collagen supplementation may aid in soft tissue injury repair and strengthen connective tissues in feet. Animal-based sources like gelatin and bone broth are recommended

Have you been taking good care of your feet lately? If you've been feeling some pain, you're not alone in this. According to a study¹ published in BMC Musculoskeletal Disorders, about 13% to 36% of adults around the world suffer from foot pain. Moreover, women are more likely to suffer from this condition than men.

Your feet absorb the impact of every step you take every day. To give you an idea what your feet go through, Courtney Conley, DC, a chiropractor and founder of Gait Happens,

explains that walking exerts forces four to six times your body weight. When you run, they take a beating even more – around 11 times your body weight.²

Hence, it's crucial for you to understand the importance of keeping your feet strong and flexible, as studies show that it can impact your physical and mental health.

The Significance of Keeping Your Feet Healthy

According to Postural Restoration therapist Aleena Kanner, each foot contains 28 bones that connect your body to the ground. While the main function of your feet is to propel your body forward, they also have another important role – transferring sensory information to your brain.

When your foot (or both feet) becomes injured, this connection is disrupted,³ which can have a tremendous influence on your quality of life. Untreated foot pain can lead to issues such as:⁴

- Locomotor disability
- Impaired balance
- Increased risk of falls
- Loss of independence

Despite the implications of untreated foot pain, many people choose to ignore it. According to a 2023 study,⁵ only 12% of people with foot pain visit a doctor for treatment. Moreover, researchers believe this number to be higher, since 30% of people with foot pain report have persistent and severe symptoms.

Again, your feet are inextricably linked to your quality of life, and ignoring it can worsen the situation. To find out the magnitude foot pain has on quality of life, researchers carried out a study⁶ in an outpatient center involving 498 participants, with a 50/50 split between test and control group.

Using surveys, researchers noted that the test group had lower scores for physical activity and vitality. They concluded that to improve quality of life, visiting a health care professional can help.

In another study,⁷ researchers suggest that foot pain may affect your mental health. From their analysis, they found a strong link between depression and stress in people affected with plantar heel pain. Participants who had Achilles tendinopathy developed low self-esteem and self-image.

Moreover, researchers highlighted that some participants had kinesiophobia (fear of physical activity) and pain catastrophizing,⁸ which is the human tendency to ruminate and even produce an exaggerated response to pain.⁹

Three Ways to Test Your Feet's Health

Given the impact foot pain has on your health, testing your feet's current fitness level can help you address foreseeable issues and mitigate further injuries. Fortunately, you don't have to hobble to a doctor right away. Here are three home tests you can do, according to The New York Times:¹⁰

- **Toe dexterity** – To measure your toe's dexterity, try this simple test – lift your big toe while keeping your other toes flat on the ground, and vice versa.

According to physiotherapist Jim Dooner, being able to independently move your toes, even when lifting a small amount, suggests healthy feet. When properly trained, they can be independent enough to play the piano, he says.

- **Toe strength** – This criterion is measured with a toe dynamometer in a clinic, but you can also use a credit card, according to Conley. To do the test, sit in a chair and place the card under your big toe, then keep the ankle directly under your knee.

Have a family member or friend pull the card from under your toe as you press into it. A good hold is between three to five seconds. Then, repeat the test, but place the

card on the other four toes. When doing this movement, an arch on the foot must appear.

If your hip flexors or quadriceps strain, you aren't engaging your foot muscles. Ideally, your foot can hold the card during both tests, without lifting your heel or curling your toes.

- **Weight distribution** – You can check your feet's weight distribution the next time you're at the beach or pool. This is important, as it's a good marker of how even you distribute your weight across your foot's "tripod."

According to Conley, proper weight distribution is shared between the heel and base of the big and little toes, "with your toes splayed in order to create a strong foundation." When your midfoot doesn't leave any imprint behind, your foot may be stiff and not rolling forward – also known as pronating – to absorb impact.

Strengthen Your Feet with This 12-Minute Workout

As studies have shown, improving your feet's condition is important. To help you in this regard, here are five drills, from easiest to most challenging, from The New York Times. The great thing about this routine is that it won't take more than 12 minutes to complete. Runners, nurses and other employees who stand for long periods can benefit from doing this workout.¹¹

Before you start, there are three prerequisites – a resistance band, one light weight (2 to 10 pounds) and a towel. Conley suggests doing the workout four to five times a week the first month, and then easing back to two to three times a week for maintenance.¹²

Intrinsic Isometric

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1. Sit in a chair and place all five toes of one foot atop a folded towel.
 2. Press the toes down, but don't grip. Raise the heel.
 3. Do these 20 seconds per side, then repeat five times.
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Banded Toe Flexion

1. Sit in a chair with your feet flat on the ground.
 2. Loop a resistance band under your big toe to create tension.
 3. Keep the lesser four toes flat on the ground as you lift the big toe.
 4. Hold for one count, then lower it.
 5. Do 20 reps per side, then loop the band on the lesser four toes and repeat.
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Big Toe Mobility Drill

1. Keep the ball of your right foot on the ground as you lift your heel up.
 2. Press that foot's big toe into the ground for 10 seconds.
 3. From the same position, try to lift your big toe for 10 seconds. Because the toe is already extended, it will barely move.
 4. Do this for 10 seconds, and repeat twice. Then, switch to the other foot.
 5. Note that this exercise can be performed sitting or standing.
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Foot Intrinsic Swing

1. Hold a light weight in your hand, between 2 and 10 pounds.
2. Press down through your right foot as you step the left foot behind you.
3. Place your weight on the ball of your foot, with your heel raised.
4. Slightly raise your right heel. Swing the weight back and forth like a pendulum to add instability to the movement.

5. You can perform the exercise next to a table or chair to help your balance.
6. Do 20 seconds per side, repeated three to four times.

Toe Push Off

1. This drill reinforces proper push off, initiated from the big toe.
 2. Stand and place a towel beneath the toes of your right foot.
 3. Slowly roll your foot up as you slide the towel behind you, pushing through the ball of your big toe.
 4. Do 40 repetitions per side.
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The Consequences of Wearing Improper Footwear

The right footwear is one of the most important aspects of keeping your feet healthy. In my article "[What to Do About Your Bunions?](#)," I consulted with Aleena Kanner, one of the leading postural experts in the U.S. and a certified Postural Restoration Institute (PRI) practitioner, about a bunion on my left foot. During our meeting, I've come to realize that one of the primary causes for my bunion was adopting a "barefoot" lifestyle for well over 10 years.

In the same way, wearing improper footwear can negatively impact your feet.¹³ If you're currently dealing with a foot injury, thoroughly assess the shoes you're wearing. According to a study¹⁴ published in Scientific Reports, you're four times more likely to develop a foot pathology due to improper footwear. Not addressing footwear can even lead to foot ulcers.¹⁵

According to Dooner, ill-fitting shoes can cramp the toes and stiffen the midfoot. He likens this to a cast, which prevents your foot from doing its full range of motion while walking. Consequently, your foot stiffens and weakens over time, leading to imbalances:¹⁶

"If the muscles within the foot or lower leg become weak and out of balance, this can create a chain reaction of problems in our feet, ankles, knees, hips and lower back," he said.

"When the toes aren't straight and flat to the ground, the natural gait cycle is impacted. Proper alignment is especially important for the big toe, which initiates propulsion when we walk."

If you're wearing flip flops, it may be time to change it to something more ergonomic. "Flip flops without a back strap don't help," said Dr. Conley. This type of footwear can cause aching and deformities that result in hammertoes, also known as mallet toes.¹⁷

How to Pick the Right Footwear

Much like your fingerprints, your feet are unique. Ideally, consulting with a professional is your best course of action so that any future injuries will be averted. If that's not possible, then you'll have to go with trial and error, which has its downsides.

Fortunately, it's possible to modify the shoes you have right now to give your body the balance it needs for proper weight distribution. Using myself as an example, Kanner gave me arch support for my right foot since the bunion is on my left foot. I also place a spacer between the bunion and the second toe to keep them apart and prevent the bunion from worsening. In [my interview with her](#), she explains the philosophy behind this approach:

"When I say the shoe gives the brain the ability to sense the ground better, I'm talking about certain aspects of the shoe ... A lot of shoes lack what we call a heel counter. A heel counter is the back of the shoe that grabs the heel and you can feel it. If it's hard, it's going to hold the heel in a better place, which is going to position the talus bone, which sits on top of the heel to align the body upwards in a better position.

Feel a barefoot shoe. There's zero heel counter there. Then that person's heel, calcaneus and talus, is going to go in whatever position the brain wants it to go

in ... That's one component of the shoe. The other component of the shoe is the arch. When you think about walking on the beach, when you're putting your foot in the sand, there's sand that comes up to solidify [and] ground that part of your arch.

You don't have that when you're walking on flat surfaces. You're just slapping your foot into the ground. The arch is getting no feedback. I see a lot of people enter a more parasympathetic state when you just put an arch in their shoe. So those are the things we look at with shoes."

Now that you're familiar with the context of using proper footwear, what's the criteria for selecting the right one for you? In addition to the list below, you can download "[The Shoe eBook](#)" for free:¹⁸

- A heel counter for calcaneal guidance, supporting the way the heel bone moves and aligns during walking
- Arch support for a better ability to pronate
- A flexible midfoot for fluid movement
- Proper heel lift
- A wide toe box for optimal alignment and comfort

Sources and References

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