

CookingLight

Care for Common Ailments

How to treat common foot complaints

The first step to correct many foot aches and pains is using shoe inserts, which control the stance and motion of the foot. "I usually recommend a high-quality insole that has a firm plastic shell," Andersen says. New Jersey Sports Podiatrist Richard Braver, D.P.M., prefers gel inserts for minor problems, such as fat pad atrophy, a sometimes painful thinning of the heel padding that can occur with age.

If you have extreme or chronic foot pain, a podiatrist may prescribe custom orthotics. They last longer—up to 10 years, as opposed to half a year or so for store-bought options—and they're tailor-made, Andersen says. The cost ranges from about \$350 to \$500.

Many foot ailments, such as the ones below, can cause problems if left untreated. But correcting them is easy once you recognize the symptoms:

Yellow or thick toenails are usually caused by fungus; try an over-the-counter antifungal solution. If that doesn't clear things up, see your doctor for a prescription oral medication. Mild discoloration may come from wearing dark nail polish. Rub these stains off with lemon-soaked paper towels, or gently buff away the top layer of the nail with a nail buffer.

Calluses (on the soles and sides of the feet) and corns (between toes) form from repetitive friction and excessive pressure. Though these patches of hard skin are harmless, they can be painful if they become too large, so prevent them by rotating your shoes. To reduce the size of calluses or corns and lessen pain, soak your feet in warm water, and gently massage the affected areas with a pumice stone or foot file, being careful to leave a layer of the callus or corn intact. Then apply an over-the-counter remover.

Plantar warts may or may not be painful. These hard, dark calluses are caused by a virus and are contagious, Braver says. Prevent them by wearing flip-flops in locker rooms and making sure the pedicurist at your salon uses sterile instruments and thoroughly cleans the foot bath between clients. To treat plantar warts, see a podiatrist, who can remove them with a simple surgical procedure.

Athlete's foot, a fungal infection usually found between the toes, causes itching, inflammation, and blisters. To prevent it, wear socks made of a wicking fabric, such as CoolMax, which draws moisture away from feet so they stay dry. Also, wear flip-flops in the locker room—they'll help protect your feet from fungus. Avoid plastic or tightly fitting shoes, and let shoes air out between wearings. Try an antifungal lotion to treat the problem.

Bunions are swollen, tender bumps at the big-toe joint that can make the toe turn inward. Caused by heredity or tight shoes, they can be painful if left untreated, Braver says. To lessen the pressure on your feet, wear athletic shoes or sandals made of soft leather. Apply an over-the-counter bunion pad, and use an ice pack to reduce swelling. If the problem worsens, consult a podiatrist, who may prescribe orthotics or surgically remove the bunion.

How do I treat a painful ingrown toenail?

The corners of your nails digging into the soft tissue of the nail grooves can be extremely painful. Alleviate irritation, redness, and swelling by soaking the foot in warm salt water for 15 minutes. Next, massage skin away from the nail with clean hands, advises Jane Andersen of the American Podiatric Medical Association. If the ingrown nail persists or gets worse, see a podiatrist, who can prescribe antibiotics and, in some cases, correct the problem surgically. To prevent ingrown nails, she says, cut toenails straight across. For more information, call 800-366-8227 or visit www.apma.org.

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