

Your Feet at Any Age

A doctor's guide · Dr. Sara Hazel · Barefoot Sage Center, Flagstaff

The foot is a complex apparatus, and it is often at the foundation, literally and figuratively, of the health of our bodies. So many things start in our feet and work their way up.

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the odds of falling for
older adults with
foot pain

20–25%

weaker toes, on average,
in people who fall

36%

fewer falls when foot
pain was treated with
orthoses, shoes & home
exercise

Why feet hurt

- **The simple truth.** Modern footwear, hard surfaces with no give that we stand and walk on, and a more sedentary lifestyle that does not strengthen certain muscles in the feet and legs all can contribute to foot pain.
- **Weak and stuck.** Plantar fasciitis is a good example: it can be caused by weakness in calf muscles as well as myofascial binding in the foot *and* lower leg.
- **The whole body.** Problems with the hips and abdominal weakness can affect the feet — and many problems in the rest of the body, even up to the neck, respond to treatment better when the foot issues are resolved.

Look at your feet

Some of the most telling signs are visible. Look at your bare feet, and watch how you walk (a phone video helps):

- **Bunions** — a bump at the base of the big toe
- **Hammer toes** — toes that bend and curl
- **Fallen arches** — the inner arch flattening to the floor
- **Rolling in** — ankles collapsing inward as you step
- **Duck-foot walk** — toes pointing out as you walk

A one-minute self-check

- Can you lift your **big toe** while the other toes stay down — and then the reverse?
- Can you **spread your toes** apart?
- Can you **stand on one foot for 10 seconds**, near something to hold on to?
- Is your **first step in the morning** painful?

Barefoot, when your feet are ready

Feet that have weakness, pain, structural issues, or neurological issues may do better at first in socks or athletic shoes that help and protect the feet and prevent injuries and falls. We can think of some socks and shoes as a kind of support system for vulnerable feet.

Socks can help warm and protect, and they can be compression socks as well as non-slip socks. Different feet need different socks and different shoes.

The ultimate goal for some people may be to strengthen and heal the feet so that going barefoot is healing, but it could take months to achieve that state, even if it is still possible.

When you are ready: the Barefoot Trail, a one-mile grounding loop at 7,200 ft in Bellemont (I-40 Exit 185), open seasonally.

Start where you stand

Some of the simplest things you can do tonight. Not necessarily the best — the best foot work is fitted to *your* feet — but a real start, and free. A lot of foot issues need strengthening of the ankle and calf muscles.

Doing stretches and strengthening at home is safe for many, but guidance and direction may be needed, particularly if there is pain, poor circulation, or balance concerns.

1. **Circle and write.** Seated, draw slow ankle circles, ten each way — or trace the alphabet with your big toe.

2. **Grab.** Scrunch a towel toward you with your toes, or pick up marbles or dry rice and drop them in a bowl.
3. **Rise.** Slowly up onto your toes and back down, ten times. Hold on to anything that gives you balance if you need to — not everyone does, or should. This one strengthens the calves and ankles.
4. **Roll.** Roll your arch over a tennis ball — or a golf ball for firmer — a minute or two each side. Or use your hands.

Range-of-motion work and self-massage with your hands or a ball can reveal hidden areas of restriction, pain, or lack of strength. As you get stronger, more reps and balance exercises without holding on may be appropriate, but this should be tailored to you. What is too easy for one person may be too hard for another.

When to get help

- Numbness or burning
- A sore or wound that won't heal
- New swelling, redness, or warmth
- Pain that changes how you walk
- A fall, or a new fear of falling

If you have diabetes or neuropathy, check with your provider before new foot exercises or ball rolling.

At the Barefoot Sage Center, we massage and stretch the stuck places and give strengthening exercises for the weak muscles. Reflexology, clinical bodywork & foot journeys.

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Health education, not personal medical advice.