

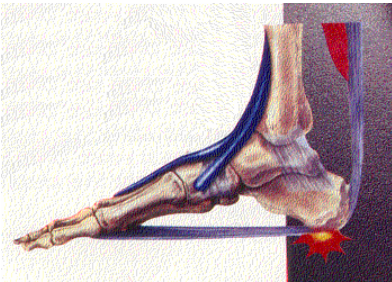


# BodyWork **Healing Heel Pain**

A S S O C I A T E S by Gloria Roubal

One of the most common causes of chronic foot pain, particularly in the heel, is plantar fasciitis, which is inflammation of the fascia (connective tissue) on the bottom of the foot. The pain is typically in the front and bottom of the heel, but it can be anywhere on the bottom of the foot where fascia is located. The intensity of the pain can vary from mild to debilitating. If you have this condition, the pain is probably the worst upon your first few steps out of bed each morning. Why? It is because the fascia of the foot tightens up as you sleep, then as the first step is taken; the fascia is stretched and then reinjured, causing the intense pain at that moment. Once it has torn on those first few steps, however, the pain generally subsides to some degree. Overnight, the fascia again shortens and repairs itself, only to begin this cycle all over again with the first step of the next morning.

There are many causes of plantar fasciitis, including spending too much time on one's feet, extra body weight, a sudden change in activity, engaging in certain sports (especially on a hard surface), and improper footwear. Interestingly enough, the number one cause is shortened calf



muscles, particularly the gastrocnemius, and possibly the soleus. These muscles both join at the calcaneal tendon, commonly known as the Achilles Tendon, which then merges with the fascia at the heel of the foot. Imagine the calf muscles being short, tight, or lacking in flexibility, which pull on the calcaneal tendon, thus putting extra tension on the plantar fascia. It is when the fascia is under this type of stress that repetitive reinjury is likely.

There are many approaches to treating, preventing, and managing the pain of plantar fasciitis. Some of these approaches include: using arch supports or other types of shoe inserts, stretching, decreasing activity, heat, ice, losing weight, taping the foot, nutritional supplements, and even surgery. Massage therapy is yet another approach that can be very effective in improving plantar fasciitis, even eliminating it in many cases. It involves treating the plantar fascia, but also and perhaps more importantly, treating the shortened calf muscles that can be crucial factors in causing this type of foot pain.

How can massage therapy help? Some massage therapy techniques have the capacity to decrease muscular tension or tightness, thus lengthening the muscles being treated. Other techniques are used to warm and loosen fascia. Warming and loosening the plantar fascia along with lengthening the calf muscles (gastrocnemius and soleus) that are putting constant stress on the plantar fascia (via the calcaneal tendon) can be the winning combination that provides dramatic relief from the pain of plantar fasciitis. Sometimes two or three treatments are enough, and in other cases a longer series is needed.

Even if the symptoms of plantar fasciitis are relieved through massage therapy, there are some important self-care issues that need to be addressed to increase the likelihood that the condition will not reoccur. In order to keep the calf muscles from returning to their previously shortened length, one should stretch them regularly. The standard "runner's stretch" (with hands against a wall) can be done, with both the stretched leg straight (stretching the gastrocnemius) and with it slightly bent (stretching the soleus). Each stretch should be held for 30 seconds. Stretching is most effective and safest when the muscles are warm after activity or after using heat on the area.

The fascia itself can also be stretched by bending the toes and foot back, especially before getting out of bed in the morning. In addition, make sure to give the fascia as much rest as possible in order to prevent reinjuring it, and then gradually increasing activity over time. In other words, be gentle on your feet even for a period of time after the pain is gone.

If you believe you have plantar fasciitis, make an appointment with one of our massage therapists at BodyWork Associates. We may be able to provide some healing relief for your heels!