

Happy Feet Presentation:

Eight in ten people suffer from some kind of foot ailment that affects their quality of life. (American Podiatric Medical Association) Data suggests foot pain relates to other health issues including weight, back, joint and knee pain, circulatory issues and heart issues. Unfortunately most westerners have lost much of the natural control and flexibility in their feet due to wearing shoes which restrict motion and cause serious atrophy and imbalance in the muscles.

The human foot contains 26 bones, 33 joints, and more than a hundred muscles, tendons, and ligaments. Feet serve two basic functions: 1. Must be flexible to allow the intricate movements for walking, running, and adapting to different terrains 2. Strong enough to support the body upright. Improving the muscles and flexibility of your feet can provide an excellent shock-absorbent and springy step, balance your body with stability and make walking, running and jumping easy and graceful

Just as the foundation of a temple must be level to support all structures above, so the feet must be balanced and sturdy to support the legs, spine, arms, and head. But our feet aren't just foundations, our feet aren't static. Our bodies are mobile temples, and our feet must be flexible and adjustable. Like tires on a car, when balanced, the feet provide a smooth ride. But when it's not balanced the strain travels up into the knees, hips or lower back.

We can take a number simple steps to improve the mobility and strength of our feet. Practicing barefoot, we develop greater feel for the ground below. As we become more intimate with our feet, they also become stronger and more mobile.

Alignment & Shape of your feet:

Pay attention to the way your feet connect with the earth. This can correct foot and ankle problems that can cause problems throughout the body. Supination and pronation are parts of a stride. Supination occurs when weight is placed on the outside of the foot while walking. When the opposite happens, and the person shifts their weight from the heel to forefoot, it is pronation. Example, pronated feet tend to cause knee problems and back pain. Supination (underpronated) can cause pain in the ankles, knees, back and hips.

Look at the shape of your feet. Are they long and narrow, like a rectangle? Or wide in front and narrow at the heel, like a triangle? Or in between?

If your feet are long and narrow, the space between the long bones of your feet (metatarsals) is often tight, which limits your ability to widen the balls of your feet and spread your toes. Try to focus on widening your feet by rolling the first metatarsal toward the inner foot and the outer metatarsal toward the outer foot to create space between the balls of the feet.

If the front of your foot is broad, the balls of your feet are usually flexible. You don't need to spread your toes or widen your feet further. Instead, focus on lengthening your metatarsals and keep them aligned with your toes.

Paying attention and adjusting your big toes during asana practice can impact your alignment and balance, giving you a calm sense of being grounded. How does it work? Muscles in your big toe support the ligaments and bones in your arches. Healthy arches act like shock absorbers, or forces of motion, up through the ankles to the knees and up the body. In standing poses like uttansana, utkatasana gently pressing the fleshy part of the big toes into the mat, which brings the femurs more upright over the ankles. Then add the outer edges of the feet to balance the inner and outer arches.

Symmetrical poses like Mountain, Chair, Standing Forward Fold, Downward Facing Dog, align your feet so the second metatarsals are parallel to each other and the second toes point directly forward. Special circumstances: standing forward bend, might turn feet in (internal rotation of thighs) and relieve sciatic pain; allowing feet to turn out in a squat can relieve strain on the knees and improve balance.

Asymmetrical poses like Triangle, Side Angle, Warrior II, and Half Moon, align your feet separately. On side poses to the right, turn your right foot (front) so that your second metatarsal is parallel to the long edge of your mat. The left (back) foot balls of the foot is parallel to the long edge of the mat.

Pada (foot) Bandha (lock) – can't be accomplished with a voluntary muscular lift. You must create strong arches by extending the foot, stretching and making space in the skin and in the muscles and connective tissues of each foot. By putting down the front of the heel, the root of the little toe, and the root of the big toe, you create a triangular base that lifts the inner arch upward. In all standing postures, these complementary forces of descending weight and rebound are at work.

Exercises to awaken your feet:

Between each exercise give your feet time to relax with a walk around the room.

1. Roll a tennis ball under each foot to open the soles. This massages many pressure points found on the bottom of the foot. Also releases the long line of fascia that begins under the feet and runs all the way through the back of the body to the top of the head.
2. Strengthen the toes by standing in Tadasana, weight evenly distributed on both feet, feeling the gentle balloon pull upward from the imaginary string on top of your head. Feel this balanced weight on your feet and allow your arches to raise if possible. Lift all 5 toes upward, then lower them back down. Repeat slowly 5-10 times. Just like before with raised arches, lift only both big toes, keeping the other four on the ground, then lower them back down. Repeat this slowly 5-10 times. Next, press the big toe onto the mat and lift up the other four toes. Finally, try lifting up the big toe and small toe together, pressing the three middle toes onto the mat. Most people who pronate, or roll to the inner arch, have a hard time lifting the big toes and most people who supinate, or roll on to the outer edges of the foot, have a hard time lifting the other toes.
3. Stretches for the sole of the foot. Thunderbolt pose (Vajrasana) Kneel and sit back on you heels with the tops of your feet in contact with the floor. Your soles will stretch and curve into a good arch underneath you. Keep your big toes and heels together so there is not gap or space between the feet. If the front of your ankles are not flexible enough to rest comfortably on the floor without a space, use a small towel or blanket to roll into a tight tube shape to place underneath, and gradually use smaller cloths until you no longer need this prop.
** Sit with your back and spine straight but not tense. Let your spine lengthen upward without forcing it. Imagine a string attached to the top of your head up to a bunch of helium balloons. On your breath inhale relax and balance, then on the exhale allow your spine to lengthen and straighten, stretching gently upward. Start in this position 1-2 minutes.
Broken toe - tuck the toes so that your soles raise facing directly behind you as your toes curl away from the soles. Lower your weight slowly and gently onto the length, not tips, of your toes. This will stretch the toes and soles. Avoid stretching too hard or release too much weight.
4. Strengthen the ankles. Sitting in Dandasana (seated with legs straight in front) point the toes away, then draw the toes toward you. This strengthens the muscles around the ankles and increases mobility. Also, standing in Tadasana near a wall for balance, inhale to lift your heels as high as possible, exhale, bring them back down. Repeat each exercise slowly 5 to 10 times.
5. Strengthen arches and ease plantar fasciitis with towel scrunches. Sit with feet flat on the floor, knees bent 90 degrees, with a towel under your feet. Scrunch your toes to grab bits of the towel and pull it toward you, inch by inch, so it bunches into your arches.

6. Restore flexibility. Sitting, rest your heels on the floor. Inhale and flex your toes so there is space between them. Exhale, squeeze your toes to form a toe fist. Repeat 5-10 times.
7. As you feel your feet getting stronger, bump it up a notch by balancing on one foot on a padded surface, like a folded blanket. You might try leaning forward and backwards and maybe adding imaginary heel raisers.

Self- foot massage:

1. Add a few drops of essential oils to your oil or lotion you use for a foot massage. Chamomile, lavender and eucalyptus each have anti-inflammatory and analgesic properties.
2. Sitting, rest your foot on opposite knee. Use both hands, walk your thumbs up the center line, using firm pressure, take extra time on any tender pressure points.
3. Rub the bottom of each toe, and then gently pull the toe upward.
4. Using the heel of the opposite hand, firmly rub the arch in a circular motion. Do the same on the ball of the foot and the heel.
5. Using the opposite hand, rotate your ankle in a circular motion, alternating directions. Flex and point the foot and then use gentle light strokes along the top of the foot.
6. Weave the fingers of your opposite hand through the toes of your foot to separate them. Spread the toes wide, but don't force it.
7. Switch and repeat on the other foot.

Poses for achy feet:

1. Adho Mukha Svanasana – back body stretch including hamstrings, calf muscles & Achilles tendon
2. Runner's lunge with back toes tucked, drop back knee & shift back toward heels, flexing front foot
3. Hero's pose – bum lowers between legs, knees pointing forward; use props if needed
4. Tree pose - done standing on a block; concentrate on weight evenly distributed
5. Bound angle - place tennis ball between feet to roll back & forth
6. Legs up the wall with a V stretch, gentle stretch for abductor muscles (inner thigh muscles); also relieves edema

Hints:

Lose your shoes around the house.

Practice lifting your arches and spreading your toes in the kitchen while waiting on your morning toast.

When you feel a burning in the feet during standing asanas, shorten your stance. If that doesn't work, take a break.

Your foot musculature is just like any other and it takes time to tone and change it. Your foot functions best when your heel and forefoot are completely level, and when your toes are allowed to flex, extend and spread.

As we free up our feet, we tap into a reservoir of potential energy that has been blocked by years of constrictive footwear. It may take a lot of work, breaking through the tight toes and arches, but it can eventually pay off by uncovering sources of energy that can keep us vital and fluid through years of practice. With the focus to our feet and toes, we can gain foot health, and also extend a moment of gratitude for these parts which carry us all day long.

Quotes: "The foot feels the foot when it feels the ground." Buddha
"Walk as if you are kissing the earth with your feet." Thich Nhat Hanh

Reference: Yoga for Healthy Feet, Donald Moyer