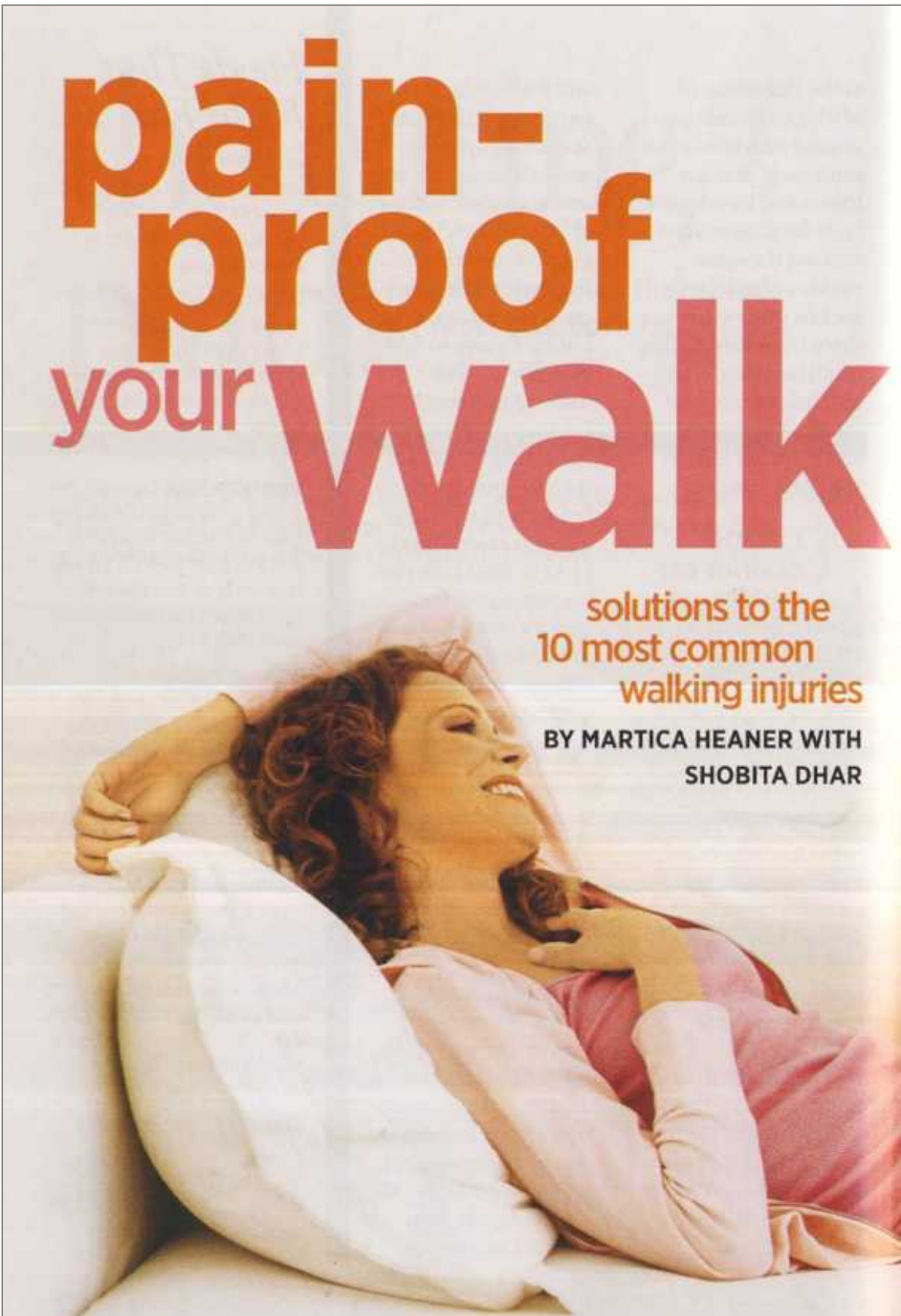


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**pain-
proof
your walk**

solutions to the
10 most common
walking injuries

BY MARTICA HEANER WITH
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WE ALL KNOW THAT WALKING IS THE SAFEST, easiest form of exercise there is, so why should you bother reading this article? Because left ignored, an innocent niggle can easily become a chronic problem. Every year thousands of people suffer walking-induced pain or a nagging old exercise injury that walking has aggravated.

Take Rachna Monga, 37, a homemaker in Jaipur. She started going for regular walks in the local park but in a few



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days she started feeling acute lower-back pain. Six months back, she had hurt her back while lifting a heavy suitcase while travelling to the hills. "I thought walking is a safe exercise and will not harm my back. But I was in for a surprise," says Monga.

As bothersome as the initial problem can be, the real damage is what happens next: you stop exercising, misplace your motivation, and soon gain weight and lose muscle tone. To make sure a debilitating injury doesn't prevent you from reaching your weight loss and fitness goals, *Prevention* asked the leading experts for their advice on how to avoid injury from walking exercises and how to treat the 10 most common walking woes.

1 Tenderness on your heel or any where on the bottom of your foot

■ Could be PLANTAR FASCIITIS

The plantar fascia is the band of tissue that runs from your heel bone to the ball of your foot. When this dual-purpose shock absorber and arch support is strained, small tears develop and the tissue stiffens as a protective response.

"Walkers can overwork the area when pounding the pavement, especially when they wear hard shoes on concrete," says Teresa Schuemann, a physical therapist and a spokesperson for the American Physical Therapy Association. "Faulty footwear, such as canvas shoes, can result in pain in the heels," says Dr Nitiraj



WANT A FOOT MASSAGE? TRY YOUR WATER BOTTLE

Oberoi, senior orthopaedic consultant and consultant sports surgeon, Max Healthcare, Delhi.

Inflammation can also result from any abrupt change or increase in your normal walking routine. People with high arches or who pronate excessively (walk on the inside of the foot) are particularly susceptible.

You know you have plantar fasciitis if you feel pain in your heel or arch first thing in the morning (the fascia stiffens during the night). If left untreated, the problem can cause a build-up of calcium, which can create a painful, bony growth around the heel known as a heel spur.

What you can do about it At the first sign of stiffness in the bottom of your foot, loosen up the tissue by doing this stretch: sit with ankle of injured foot across opposite thigh. Pull toes toward shin with hand until you feel a stretch in arch. Run opposite hand along sole of foot; you should feel a taut band of tissue. Do 10 stretches, holding each for 10 seconds. Then stand and massage

PHOTOS BY VILMAAR; HAIR BY INDIRICHAJI ALVONI; MAKEUP BY ALEJANDRA HERRIZAGAL FOR ARTISTS BY TINKU/THY PHRASED

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Quick tip

See a specialist for pain that lasts longer than a few weeks. Good choices include orthopaedic surgeons, physiatrists, podiatrists (for foot problems), and physical therapists

your foot by rolling it on a golf ball or full water bottle.

To reduce pain, wear supportive shoes or sandals with a contoured footbed at all times. Choose walking shoes that are not too flexible in the middle. They should bend at the ball but provide stiffness and support at the arch. "And always wear thick cotton socks," adds Oberoi. "If the pain does not subside, a local injection of hydro-cortisone should be administered," says Dr P K Dave, *Prevention* advisor and orthopaedic surgeon, Rockland Hospital, Delhi.

Orthotic inserts (by Dr Scholl's, for example) or a custom-made pair can help absorb some of the impact of walking, especially on hard surfaces. Until you can walk pain-free, stick to flat, stable, giving paths (such as a level dirt road) and avoid pavement, sand, and uneven ground that might cause too much flexing at the arch, says Phillip Ward, DPM, a podiatrist in Pinehurst, US.

If the condition worsens, ask a doctor to prescribe a night splint to stabilise your foot in a slightly flexed position, which will counteract tightening while you sleep.

2 Soreness or swelling on the sides of your toes

■ Could be **INGROWN TOENAILS**

This happens when the corners or sides of your toenails grow sideways rather

than forward, putting pressure on surrounding soft tissues and even growing into the skin. "Ingrown toenails result from wearing shoes that are too short or too tight, and cramp your toes," says Dr Mahesh Jukar, sports medicine consultant L H Hiranandani Hospital, Mumbai. It can result in inflammation and pus formation, says Jukar.

What you can do about it Leave some space in your shoes; you may need to go up a half size when you buy sneakers, because feet tend to swell during exercise. Use toenail clippers (not regular nail cutters or scissors) to cut straight across instead of rounding the corners.

"People who overpronate when they walk can exacerbate existing problems in the big toes," says Ward, who suggests using inserts to reduce pronation (the act of putting or holding a foot with the sole turned downwards). If you have diabetes or any circulatory disorder, have your ingrown toenails treated by an orthopaedic doc.

3 Pain in the back of your heel and lower calf

■ Could be **ACHILLES TENDINITIS**

The Achilles tendon, which connects the calf muscle to the heel, can be irritated by walking too much, especially if you don't build up to it. Repeated flexing of the foot when walking up and down steep hills or

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on uneven terrain can also strain the tendon. "A flat foot, or heel spur—a bone outgrowth on the heel can also cause this pain," says Jukar. However, this does not need surgical intervention.

What you can do about it For mild cases, reduce your mileage—or substitute non-weight-bearing activities such as swimming or upper-body training, so long as these don't aggravate the pain. "Avoid walking uphill, because this increases the stretch

on the tendon, irritating it and making it weaker," says Schuemann.

Regular calf stretches may help prevent Achilles tendonitis, says Michael J Mueller, PT, PhD, an associate professor of physical therapy at Washington University School of Medicine. In severe cases, limit or stop walking and place cold packs on the injured area for 15 to 20 minutes, up to three or four times a day, to reduce inflammation and pain. When you return to walking, keep the

if the shoe fits...

Buy it. When it comes to walking workouts, there's nothing more important than a good shoe. "Don't think that you can just go to the store and pick out cheap fitness shoes simply because you are a beginner or don't walk much," says Melinda Reiner, DPM, vice president of the American Association for Women Podiatrists. Different feet need different shoes. To find a perfect pair, keep these tips in mind:



CHOOSE A WALKING SHOE Any old shoe may work, but a shoe designed for walking will decrease your risk of injury and boost performance. A good one will be flexible in the ball of the foot, but not in the arch. (A shoe that bends in the arch will place increased stress on the plantar fascia.) The heel should be cushioned (you don't need a lot of padding in the forefoot) and also rounded to speed your foot through the heel-toe motion with ease.

GO OFFLINE FOR A FIT This is one purchase that must be made in person. Whether you have low arches or tend to overpronate, the salespeople in a good, technical running store will watch you walk barefoot and help you choose the features you need. Best to try: a store that's independently owned.

BUY BIG People—women especially—tend to buy shoes that are too small. Ask the salesperson to help you check the fit, and don't get caught up in thinking that you have to buy a size 8 because that's what you've always worn. Athletic shoes can be sized quite differently from your dress shoes.

TOSS 'EM OFTEN Don't skimp on your feet. Once the interior padding has lost its spring, it's time for a new pair. Generally, that means replacing your shoes every 500 miles—sooner if you have foot, ankle, knee, or back problems. —MH

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TO PREVENT BACK PAIN, DO A SHIRT PULL EXERCISE

foot in a neutral position by sticking to flat surfaces, and gradually increase your distance and intensity.

4 Pain on the bony side of your big toe

■ Could be A BUNION

A bunion develops when the bones in the joint on the outer side of the big or little toe become misaligned, forming a painful swelling. Walkers with flat feet, low arches, or arthritis may be more apt to develop the problem. "It also results when we don't distribute our weight evenly over our feet," says Dr Harshvardhan Hegde, orthopaedic surgeon, Artemis Hospital, Gurgaon.

What you can do about it "Wear shoes that are wider—especially in the toe box," says Ward. Cushioning the bunion with over-the-counter pads can provide relief, and icing it for 20 minutes after walking will numb the area. Under go gait training to learn to distribute weight evenly over our feet.

Ultrasound or other physical therapy treatments may reduce the inflammation. Severe cases can require surgery to remove the bony protrusion and realign the toe joint.

5 An ache in your mid to lower back

■ Could be LUMBAR STRAIN

This is caused mostly because of tightness in the hamstring muscles and laxity in the lower abdomen muscles, says Oberoi. Repetitive movement can make an existing lower-back injury worse. Arthritis or inflammation of surrounding nerves can also cause pain in this region.

What you can do about it For general back health, regularly do stretches for hamstrings and also isometric exercise. Keep the muscles in your trunk strong. While you walk, engage your abs by pulling your belly button toward your spine as if you were trying to flatten your belly to zip up tight jeans.

"Avoid bending over at the waist, a tendency when you are walking fast or uphill," says Schuermann. "Instead, keep your spine elongated and lean your whole body slightly forward from your ankles."

A shirt-pull exercise (see pic) might also prevent slumping by realigning your posture. You can even do it while you walk. Simply cross your arms at wrists in front of your waist and raise arms as if you're pulling a shirt up over your head. Grow taller as you reach up,

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bone wears down causing the two bones to rub against each other. This causes pain and inflammation," explains Hegde. This condition is seen mostly in younger, physically active people. Walkers with a misaligned kneecap, prior injury, weak or imbalanced thigh muscles, soft knee cartilage, or flat feet, or those who simply walk too much, are also at a greater risk. The pain usually appears when walking downhill, while doing knee bends, or during prolonged sitting.

What you can do about it Shift to another type of exercise until the pain subsides. It takes typically 8 to 12 weeks, and avoid too many knee bends. Do some quad strengtheners to help align the kneecap and beef up support around the knee: sit with back against a wall, right leg bent with foot flat on floor and left leg straight in front of you. Contract quads and lift left leg, keeping foot flexed. Repeat 12 times; work up to three sets per leg. While standing, place a looped band around both feet and sidestep 12 to 15 times to right, then back to left.

When walking or hiking downhill, take smaller steps and try not to bend your knees too much, or try walking sideways to give your side hip muscles a workout.

10 Acute pain in your foot or lower leg

■ Could be a **STRESS FRACTURE**

This pain may occur due to a stress fracture—a tiny crack in a bone. Most common in the lower leg, it tends to occur when leg muscles become overloaded from repetitive stress

because the bone absorbs the shock, rather than the muscle. According to Dave, the pain may also result because of medical conditions such as gout and rheumatoid arthritis. "Proper diagnosis is a must for proper treatment," he adds.

Walking is more likely to lead to a stress fracture when you walk too long without warming up sufficiently. This is especially true for people who have high arches or rigid, flat feet. Women may be more vulnerable because their muscle mass and bone density don't always act as adequate shock absorbers.

What you can do about it Kick back and let the area heal for several weeks. "You need to get off your feet to avoid loading the bones," says Sheila Dugan, MD, a physiatrist and an assistant professor at Rush Medical College. Try replacing walking with swimming, water aerobics, or upper-body weight training.

When you return to your regular regimen, be careful. Stop at any sign of discomfort. "If you walk a kilometer and experience symptoms again, then start small by walking 500 meters and take several weeks to build up to the longer distance," says Russell.

Replace walking shoes when the interior cushioning has worn down. This will ensure adequate shock absorption, and reduce the risk of an injury. To optimise bone health, do some lower-body strength training, twice a week, and include calcium-rich foods such as milk, yogurt, cheese, and greens such as spinach, in your diet. The RDA of calcium for Indian women is 400 mg.

Try to follow our experts' advice and make walking a fun workout. ■