

MAIL TODAY

Our feet are the most neglected and abused part of our body and pain in them may signal health problems that we can't afford to ignore

By RITUPARNA MUKHERJEE

HISTORICALLY, the feet are regarded with reverence. Washing the feet of a guest was a mark of respect as was touching and even kissing them in Asian, Egyptian and some European cultures. In contrast, the Chinese are well known for abusing feet, as tiny feet are desirable and symbolise class in women in that culture. Women went to great lengths to prevent their feet from growing; they bandaged them tightly, and also broke the four small toes, bending these under the sole of the foot. After breaking the arch, the foot was then squeezed into shoes three times too small.

Podiatrists are of the opinion that women in India are coming perilously close to harming their own feet too. "Women wear impossibly high heels, too-tight shoes and go for pedicures in unhygienic conditions," says Dr Govind Singh Bisht, podiatrist, Max Healthcare. Painful feet are also ignored, which is unfortunate as pain may be a symptom of other health problems like an impacted back or arthritic knees.

THEY CARRY A LOT OF WEIGHT

OUR feet are a complex structure, each made up of 26 bones, ligaments, tendons and hinge joints and when we stand, our body weight is distributed equally to both of them. When we walk or run, the feet bear almost double the amount of body weight, so its proper distribution is crucial for the health. Most foot problems arise from an improper distribution of our weight, caused by wearing the wrong kind of footwear, an improper posture and gait. If this is not corrected, the constant friction from movement results in conditions like foot corns and calluses, bunions and cracked and painful heels. Over a prolonged period distorted feet and toes, stress fractures, wear and tear of the knee, back problems and constantly painful and tired feet may result. Certain health problems and birth defects can also cause lifelong problems of the foot if not corrected or treated.

BLAME IT ON FOOTWEAR

"WEARING shoes with narrow and pointed tips and high pointed heels, thin soles and inadequate padding are bad for the health of the feet. Corns and calluses, bunions, tendonitis, arch sprains and stress fractures are some of the conditions which may result from this kind of footwear," says Dr Dave, HOD orthopaedics, Rockland Hospital. Here are some common problems that result from wearing the wrong shoes:

◆ Corns and calluses

CORNS and calluses are common problems that arise when certain parts of the feet are subjected to continuous abnormal pressure. The skin thickens as a bodily response to this pressure resulting in a corn which looks very ugly although the condition itself is harmless. When the thick skin spreads over a large

area of the foot, it is called a callus. All too often people tend to take a blade and attempt to slice off this accumulation of dead skin which can cause cuts and infection. The best way to treat this problem is to apply antibiotic ointments to rid the area of any infection, and use corn caps. Corn caps are little round plaster which contain salicylic acid which softens the hardened skin while relieving the pressure of that area of the foot. They come in different shapes and sizes, so one can buy them depending on the shape of the corn. The salicylic acid may affect the skin around the corn so to avoid this problem, put some cotton on the area around it and then paste on the cap. If the problem is severe then it is best to see a doctor to have it removed instead of attempting to remove it at home using clippers or blades, adds Dr Dave.

◆ Bunions

BUNIONS are caused by constant walking or standing without giving the feet rest, combined with bad shoes. These form when the big toe is forced into a position contrary to its normal alignment. "Continuous standing and walking weakens the arch, causing the foot to become flattened and the big toe joint to project outwards. Pressure is then placed upon the projecting joint by bad footwear, which causes the lining of the joint to become inflamed when aggravated. This lump on the inner foot can become swollen and painful if left untreated," says Dr Kanav Biagra, podiatrist, Boyner Clinic. If your job involves long hours of standing or walking, wearing non-constrictive footwear can prevent bunions. Avoid shoes that are ill fitted, have high heels or pinch and invest in those that are supportive, have a wide

fitting toe, low heel and good quality insoles. In addition to this, anti-inflammatory medications, cold compresses, massage and foot soaking are all methods in which you can relieve painful bunions.

◆ Painful feet

ARCH pain and plantar fasciitis — or heel pain — are other common problems that arise when constant pressure is placed on the heel of the foot while walking. This causes soreness of the heel which is at its height in the morning. Inflammation of the tissues connected to the heel bone (which act as a natural cushion for the heel) is caused by the constant pressure. "The fibrous bands supporting the arch of the foot are pulled or stretched excessively, and continual irritation can lead to a bony growth on the bottom of the heel bone called a "heel spur," explains Dr Bisht. Excessive strain on the feet can also cause Achilles tendonitis, in which the tendon at the back of the foot swells or degenerates, causing a burning or shooting pain on movement. If the soles or heels of your shoes get worn down quickly, this is probably because of the misalignment of the feet and an imbalance in the pressure placed on the tendon. Women who wear high heels on a regular basis are especially prone to Achilles tendonitis. This is because the Achilles tendon is shortened by constant wearing of high heels; therefore when flat shoes such as trainers are worn the tendon becomes stretched and

inflamed. "Orthotic devices (special shoe inserts) such as heel cups, heel cradles as well as application of ice packs are an effective way to treat the pain associated with Achilles tendonitis. The orthotic lifts the heels, whilst supporting the arch and reduces stress to the tendon. However, seeing a doctor is crucial as there may be tears in the tendon which need medical attention," says Dr Dave.

Beware that pedicure

A PEDICURE gone wrong can affect the feet adversely. "Getting a pedicure in the wrong place puts women at risk of getting fungal cross infection and warts. The instruments used can harbour germs if they are not washed in antiseptic after each use," explains Dr Biagra. A lot of beauticians make the mistake of roughly scrubbing the feet with harsh metal scrapers, cutting the nails very close to the nail bed, cleaning beneath the nails with sharp metal scrapers and pushing the cuticles of the nails back with sharp tools. These can result in cuts and subsequent infections from infected instruments. "Gentleness is the key during a pedicure as the rough scraping of dead skin cuts the healthy skin beneath it. The cuticles should only be pushed back with a wooden spatula designed especially for it, or the stick of an ice-lolly," says Saliya Sharma, VP beauty training, VLCC. Discoloured and distorted nails which are difficult to trim are another sign of fungal infection and should be treated accordingly. Tight footwear, too much trimming, an injury caused to the nails during games

PUT YOUR BEST FOOT FORWARD

FOOT CARE

As the name suggests, Athlete's foot is a fungal foot infection more common in athletes. Sportsmen are more prone to Athlete's foot because their shoes tend to get sweaty. Also, the floors of changing rooms in gyms and swimming pools create a breeding ground for infectious bacteria. "This infection generally occurs between the toes and manifests in the form of peeling, redness and itching and blistering of the skin. Not drying the feet after a bath or a swim, or wearing damp shoes and dirty socks can cause this condition which can also spread to the nails and other parts of the body," says Dr Biagra. Cross infection from infected pedicure equipment is also common. Good hygiene is the solution. "Wash the feet with soap and water, and dry them thoroughly. Use anti-fungal powder, change socks daily and wear open shoes to prevent and cure this problem," says Dr Bisht. Anti-fungal creams are effective too.



MAIL TODAY



ALL YOU WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT YOUR FOOTWEAR

THE GOOD: Crocs Rx shoes are made from a special 'croslipe' material which has silver particles to make the shoes anti-fungal and odour resistant with a superior grip. These are an ideal choice if you suffer from diabetes or even arthritis. They are available in three styles, "Relief" for the regular customer, "Cloud" and "Silver Cloud" - specialised products made specially to cater to the needs of diabetic patients.



THE REALLY BAD: Stilettoes and pencil heels literally make you stand and walk on your tiptoes, throwing your body out of its natural alignment. They subject your knees to unnatural pressure and put you at risk of twisting your ankle. If you must wear them, make sure they don't have ankle straps as in the event of a fall the ankle may fracture or even break because it is bound in place by the strap while the rest of the foot turns. Opt for block heels which offer better support and balance.



THE REASONABLE: The kitten heel is the best bet if you want to look stylish and chic and not kill your feet or back. Only make sure that the heel, however tiny, is not placed in the middle of the heel area instead of the back. This will affect balance and posture and again cause unequal distribution of body weight.



THE BEST: Platform heels and their more sophisticated cousin, wedge heels, are the best kinds of heels, says podiatrists. They provide the lift that women look for in high heels and keep the feet aligned too. The risk of twists and sprains is minimal and the feet are not unnaturally arched. The toes and knees also benefit as no pressure is placed on them.



or by stubbing the toes against a hard surface can also result in discoloured nails, which can stop growing or curl inwards into the flesh, infecting the area in the process. "This can be a recurring problem if not treated and surgery may sometimes be required to rectify the in growth," says Dr Bisht.

SMELLY FEET

SWEATY and smelly feet are a common problem. For some people, however, this may be embarrassing and persistent. "Many people are prone to very sweaty feet, which leads to discomfort and a stench," says Dr Bisht. The feet contain 250,000 sweat glands that constantly secrete moisture to keep them moist, supple and healthy. Today's footwear is synthetic, a primary cause of sweatiness. Shoes and socks which don't allow the feet to breathe lead to excessive perspiration and an increase in bacteria that may cause sweaty, smelly feet and sometimes Athlete's foot. Both physical and emotional stress and even weather changes may also cause excessive sweating. Maintaining a hygiene routine is usually the best method of prevention. Shoes should be well fitted and made from leather. "Socks should be manufactured from more natural materials, such as wool, cotton or a mixture of the two, as these materials are absorbent and will help keep feet dry. Special detachable insoles designed to keep feet dry and odour free are an inexpensive way to keep shoes fresh," says Dr Biagra.

FLAT FEET ARE CONGENITAL

FLAT feet are commonly a congenital condition but can also be acquired when feet are subjected repeatedly to hard sur-

faces as this eventually weakens the arches. "Kathak dancers often have flat feet as they bang their feet hard on the floor while dancing. A flattened arch causes the foot to roll inwards to gain contact with the floor and support the weight of the body. Using orthotics (special insoles) helps provide support to the feet, enabling them to function better," says Dr Bisht. The arch of the foot is developed by the age of 4 or 5, and parents need to ensure that this happens. If the arch seems under-developed, a visit to the orthopaedician or a podiatrist is called for. The most effective orthotics are custom made to fit your foot, but in many cases non-prescription orthotics or insoles can be used. Diagnosis is important as subjecting the feet to increased pressure can cause other foot, knee and back problems, by diminishing the ability to absorb shock.

BAD HEALTH TO BLAME

VARIOUS diseases can impact the feet. Diabetics may experience what is called neuropathy, responsible for a loss of sensation in the feet. Because of loss of sensation, any abrasions or cuts to the foot can go unnoticed. "The deadening of sensation also makes it difficult to determine when excessive pressure is being applied and therefore the feet do not adapt to deal with the stress. This makes them more prone to injury," says Dr Dave. Foot ulcers are also common in diabetics. "Ulcers or any open wounds should not be left untreated, as they are a common cause of lower extremity amputation. If they are caught in the early stages they can be treated by surgically removing the dead skin or using padding or orthotic devices to relieve pressure from the ulceration to allow it to heal," says Dr Bisht. Another ailment that

impacts the feet - usually the big toe - is gout. Gout is caused by increased levels of uric acid in the blood that crystallises and settles in various joints of the body, making them painful to touch. Diet modification to reduce the levels of uric acid, medication and icepacks can offer relief.

According to the tenets of alternative medicine, each part of the foot is reputedly linked to another, often distant part of the body, with influence extending not just to the muscles but also to the vital organs such as the heart as well. For example, the tips of the toes can be massaged to relieve a headache and paying attention to the heel and the front portion of the ankle would ensure a healthy back. Based on this theory, caring for your feet would ultimately mean taking care of your overall health, and ensure your general well-being!

rituparna.mukherjee @mailtoday.in