

PATIENT EDUCATION HANDOUT

Heel Pain: Common Causes and When to See a Doctor

Franklin Berkey, DO; Marina Jeffery, DO

Ronald Januchowski, DO, FACOFP, Editor • Paula Gregory, DO, MBA, CHCQM, FAIHQ, FACOFP, Health Literacy Editor

Heel pain can have several different causes. The most common causes include:

- **Plantar fasciitis** are small tears and inflammation in the connective tissue between the heel and ball of the foot, often from walking, running or jumping. The pain is typically worse first thing in the morning or after prolonged periods of rest.
- **Achilles tendonitis** is inflammation of the connective tissue that attaches your calf muscle to your heel, causing pain at the back of the heel. Similar to plantar fasciitis, it is often caused by starting a new exercise program too quickly.
- **Heel bursitis** is a swelling of the bursa (a fluid sac designed to cushion the back of the heel) usually caused by pressure from shoes. The swelling is in the back of the heel and is sometimes tender to the touch.
- A **heel spur** is a bony growth that develops around the heel bone, often caused by ill-fitting shoes or repeated stress to the foot. Depending on the location, it can sometimes cause pain with walking.
- A **stress fracture** is a “crack” in a bone, often due to overuse or trauma.

HOME TREATMENT OPTIONS

If you have heel pain, **limit activities** that cause repeated trauma to the heel. This includes activities and sports that involve walking, running and jumping.

Icing reduces inflammation and pain. Ice packs can be purchased or made by putting ice in a plastic bag. Wrap the bag in a towel and mold it to the painful area of the foot. Use the ice pack for 20 minutes up to four times daily. Applying ice to your heel after exercising, stretching and working will also help with symptoms.

Over-the-counter **non-steroid anti-inflammatories (NSAIDs)**, such as ibuprofen (Advil) and acetaminophen (Tylenol), can also help. Check with your doctor to see if it is OK for you to take these medications.

TREATMENT OPTIONS

Your osteopathic family physician can diagnose the cause of your heel pain with a thorough history and physical exam, along with appropriate testing. If you note worsening swelling or redness, fevers over 100.4 degrees Fahrenheit or inability to stand on the affected foot, you should see your doctor.

FIGURE 1:

Stretching techniques to help plantar fasciitis and Achilles tendonitis.



Sit on a chair with your feet on the floor. Place a tennis ball under your foot and roll it over the ball to massage the underside of your foot. You can also do this with a frozen water bottle.



To stretch your Achilles tendon, keep both feet flat and use your outstretched arms to lean against a wall. You should feel stretching in the leg farther from the wall.



Using a towel, wrap the top of your foot and pull back with your hands. You should feel stretching in the bottom of your foot and the back of your heel.

SOURCE(S): American Family Physician, Osteopathic Family Physician, Up-To-Date®

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