

Happy Feet!

The best steps to keeping yours feeling great—forever.

By **Leslie Goldman**

WHETHER YOU'RE POUNDING THE PAVEMENT in a pair of killer heels, propelling through a 5K, or pursuing a 5-year-old around the house, you probably take your feet for granted. But as you get older, your tootsies develop their own unique growing pains and need you to show them some love. Here's how to sidestep the biggest foot-health issues—and enjoy pain-free feet for years to come.



Toe tips: Wiggle 'em, and flex and unflex to keep the joints in your feet limber.

YOUR 30s

HEAD OFF HORMONE HASSLES.

Pregnancy can change your body right down to your toes. A hormone called relaxin (which loosens pelvic ligaments in the third trimester) can also affect ligaments in the feet, causing the arches to drop. Then foot muscles in the bottom of the feet spasm in an effort to maintain the arches, says podiatrist Megan Leahy, spokeswoman for the Illinois Podiatric Medical Association. The result? The achy, throbbing pain of plantar fasciitis, an inflammation of the tissue across the bottom of the foot. (Nonpregnant women can develop it, too, often from weight gain or wearing unsupportive shoes.) A great stretch to treat—or prevent—this heel pain: Stand facing a wall, 3 feet away from it; step forward with your right foot, keeping your left heel on the floor. Lean forward, supporting yourself against the wall until you feel a stretch; hold for 90 seconds. Stretch on each side, 3 times a day. Dr. Leahy also suggests an arch support—as well as supportive shoes instead of flip-flops, ballerina flats, or Uggs.

PICK THE RIGHT KICKS. “Most women have flatter feet than they think and need a different shoe,” Dr. Leahy notes. Step out of the shower and look at your wet foot’s imprint on the bath mat. A flatter foot will leave a wider spot; a higher-arched one will show less contact along the inner arch. Those with low arches often need a stability shoe, such as the Adidas Supernova Sequence 2.0 (\$100; ShopAdidas.com). High arches often benefit from extra cushioning; the ASICS GEL-Nimbus 12 (\$125; ASICS.com) is a good one to try. Whatever kind of arch you have, you’ll help prevent foot problems by tossing your running or walking shoes after 350 to 500

You at 30, 40, 50+

miles—about every 8 to 12 months if you log about 10 miles a week.

WATCH FOR WARTS. Younger women tend to have better-hydrated skin, making them more prone to getting plantar warts on the bottoms of their feet. That's because the virus that causes these nasties thrives in warm, moist places—i.e., sweaty feet or slick locker room floors. These warts often masquerade as calluses, but have teeny black dots. Try an over-the-counter wart remover with salicylic acid.

YOUR 40s

GO LOW. Years of pointy shoes with cramped toe boxes or shifting your weight forward onto the balls of your feet in high heels can lead to bunions (a painful bump on the side of the big toe joint that drives the big toe inward), hammer toes (a claw-like toe deformity), and Morton's neuromas (nerve swelling, often at the base of the third and fourth toes). These conditions are also hereditary, so even if you've never tortured your feet, you may be prone. Adding insult to injury, the shock-absorbing fat pad on the bottom of your feet starts to get thinner, making heels even harder to tolerate. The solution: kick off your 3-plus-inch heels for kitten or wedge heels, or flats with cushioning and support. Or wear sneakers or walking shoes to work, then change into a 2-inch heel, advises New York City podiatrist Jacqueline Sutera: "Commuter shoes—with rubber soles, shock absorption, and arch support can really save your feet." Merrell and Geox make cute, comfy ones.

BUY RIGHT. Shop for shoes with wide and deep toe boxes—and in the right size! "Most women wear a full size-and-a-half too small," Dr. Leahy says. Feet tend to grow longer and wider as you age, especially if

you've been pregnant, which means you shouldn't be in the same size shoe that you wore in college. Still crave stilettos? Try a gel pad, like Dr. Scholl's For Her Ball of Foot Cushions (\$6.99; DrScholls.com), under your forefoot.

FIX FUNKY FUNGUS. As many as 40 percent of women over age 40 have fungal toenails. Besides looking yucky (fungal nails can be yellowed or brownish, and thick), the fungus—which also causes athlete's foot—can lead to bacterial infections and pain. Common culprits: shoes that don't breathe or a penchant for pedicures. (If you leave the polish on for too long, nails don't get any air.) Dr. Leahy advocates taking a three-week polish break twice a year. Also, try rubbing tea tree oil or Vicks VapoRub into a buffed nail bed twice daily. If those moves don't work, you may need prescription oral or topical antifungals.

YOUR 50s+

HEAL YOUR HEELS. Lizard-like heels can result from menopause-related hormonal changes, as well as backless shoes or flip-flops that bang the heel rather than hug it. To treat them:

smooth on a moisturizing cream with urea, uric acid, or lactic acid, such as Curél Targeted Therapy Deep-Penetrating Foot Cream (\$4.99; drugstores). For extra softening, slather it on at night, avoiding between the toes, and slip on socks.

LOOSEN UP. The irony is that as our body parts start to soften in our 50s, our joints—including the ones in our feet—stiffen up. Irvine, California-based podiatrist Sheryl Strich recommends these Pilates-based exercises once a day to help maintain flexibility: 1) Sit with your knees touching as your feet move together along the floor, tapping to the right, center, and left. 2) Bend and flex your toes; flex and unflex them in order to move your feet along the floor like they're inchworms. **Q**



Go wild and baby your feet: Look for structured flats with some cushioning and support.

Photo: Todd Huffman, Prop styling: Vanessa Griggs