

Plantar heel pain: Advice and exercises

Therapies Department
Foot and Ankle Orthopaedic Service

What is plantar heel pain?

Plantar heel pain is when people experience persistent pain on the bottom of the heel. The most common condition causing heel pain is plantar fasciitis.

Plantar fasciitis is swelling of the strong strap of tissue that supports the arch of the foot.

Most people experience a gradual improvement in symptoms and recover over 12 months or less.

The advice in this booklet will support you in managing your heel pain.

Most people will get better gradually following this advice. Some people that have long-term problems and have followed the exercises and advice in this booklet may be considered for other treatments.



What are the symptoms?

- Pain in the heel, sometimes in both feet
- The pain is usually worse first thing in a morning or your first steps after a period of rest
- Walking usually improves the pain but can worsen after a period of walking or standing
- Some people limp to reduce pressure through the affected heel



Treatment

Resting your heel for a short period of time

To settle down the pain try to limit aggravating activities for six weeks. This might be standing for long periods or walking long distances. You may need to speak to others to make some changes during this period, such as employers to alter work patterns and activities.

After this period you will then need to start slowly building up your activities again back to normal. Build up how much you are doing things over a month or two.

It is usually advisable to wait until you can walk for several miles and be able to do the exercises in this booklet without aggravating your heel pain before heavier exercise that puts more stress on the heel such as jogging and running.

Managing pain

As time goes on your heel pain usually improves. Simple painkillers or creams may be helpful. Most of these can be sourced from your local pharmacist without a prescription. You can talk through the best options for you with a pharmacist.

Not all medicines suit everyone. If a medicine isn't working for you, or if you are experiencing unpleasant effects from it, then see your GP or pharmacist. They can review your medications and help find the right one for you.

Using cold for pain relief

You could also try using cold over the area as this can ease pain.

Apply an ice pack wrapped in a damp towel and leave this on your heel for about 10 minutes.

After applying cold, wait for at least an hour before applying it again.

Please note:

- A towel needs to be used to protect your skin from getting burnt or irritated by the cold.
- Do not use a cream that numbs the area (analgesic cream) at the same time as using cold.
- If you have a medical condition that affects your circulation or sensation in the lower leg, please speak to a health professional before using cold for pain relief.

Footwear

- Wear well fitted shoes that support your foot and cushion your heel. Some people get pain relief from using a gel heel cup or pad inserted into footwear. These can be moved between items of footwear. These are usually available at a pharmacy.

Weight loss

- Being overweight increases the risk of plantar heel pain. Losing weight may help decrease your heel pain. If you need advice on managing your weight there are some useful suggestions and plans here: <https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/healthy-weight/start-the-nhs-weight-loss-plan/>
- You can also ask about what support for weight loss is available locally at your local GP surgery.

Exercises to improve heel pain

Exercises can help improve heel pain considerably but require a lot of regular practice in order for them to have an effect. Some people find it helpful to make a note in a diary or on a calendar to keep track.

It takes months of exercise for the heel pain to change long-term. Some people can get improvements within a few weeks of exercising, while others need to work at it for much longer. We recommend you keep up your exercises for at least 3 to 4 months. Some people may choose to continue for longer if they are still getting better or find them helpful.

You do not need to avoid pain completely while exercising, just work to the level that you can manage.

We advise that any pain that increases with exercise should settle within a few hours. If it takes longer than that, then you could work at a lower level next time until your heel gets used to exercise.

Some people find that the muscles and joints in their legs ache more generally for a few days after starting a new exercise or when increasing the amount. This is a normal response to doing more difficult exercises and generally gets better over time.

The exercises recommended for you are indicated by your physiotherapist by marking the box next to the description.

X

There is a QR code next to each exercise so you can view a video of the exercise being done. Alternatively, you can follow these web links to access the videos:

www.ruh.nhs.uk/foot

www.ruh.nhs.uk/ankle



Exercise 1: Foot arch stretch



- **Sit in a chair with your foot resting on your knee.**
 - **If you can't raise your foot this way, try using a scarf looped around your toes.**
1. Pull your big toe up and bend your ankle until you feel a pull underneath your foot.
 2. Use your other hand to feel for the tension in the arch of your foot.
 3. Hold for 10 seconds.
 4. Repeat 10 times.
 5. Repeating the stretches **3 times spread out over the day** is recommended.

Exercise 2: Calf stretch



- Toes of both feet should be pointing forward.



- **Rest your hands on the back of a chair or against a wall.**

1. Lean forward bringing your front knee towards the chair or wall.
2. Keep your heels on the ground and the back knee straight.
3. You should feel tightness in the calf muscle.
4. Hold for 20 seconds.
5. Relax and repeat up to 3 times in total.
6. Repeating the stretches **3 times spread out over the day** is recommended.

Exercise 3: Active foot arch stretch



- **Barefooted on non-slip flooring.**
 - **Rest your hands on a support for balance.**
 - **Roll the edge of a towel and place it under your toes.**
 - **If the exercise makes your toes hurt then reduce the amount of towel underneath.**
1. Raise your heels slowly up. It should take a count of three to reach the top of the heel raise.
 2. Hold for 2 seconds.
 3. Slowly lower your heels back down. It should take a count of three to return to where you started.
 4. Repeat ___ times.
 5. Repeating the exercise ____ **times spread out over the day** is recommended.

Exercise 4: Active foot arch stretch on one leg



- **Barefooted on non-slip flooring.**
 - **Rest your hands on a support for balance.**
 - **Roll the edge of a towel and place it under your toes.**
 - **If the exercise makes your toes hurt then reduce the amount of towel underneath.**
1. Standing on your affected leg. Raise your heel slowly up. It should take a count of three to reach the top of the heel raise.
 2. Hold for 2 seconds.
 3. Slowly lower your heel back down. It should take a count of three to return to where you started.
 4. Repeat ___ times.
 5. Repeating the exercise _____ **times spread out over the day** is recommended.

If you have pain in the other heel, repeat on that side also but note you may not be able to manage the full amount of exercise on both sides.

Exercise 5: Active foot arch stretch off a step



- **Barefooted on a step with your heels over the edge.**
 - **Rest your hands on a support for balance.**
 - **Roll the edge of a towel and place it under your toes.**
 - **If the exercise makes your toes hurt then reduce the amount of towel underneath.**
1. Raise your heels slowly up. It should take a count of three to reach the top of the heel raise.
 2. Hold for 2 seconds.
 3. Slowly lower your heels back down. It should take a count of three to return to where you started.
 4. Repeat ___ times.
 5. Repeating the exercise _____ **times spread out over the day** is recommended.

Exercise 6: Active foot arch stretch off a step on one leg



- **Barefooted on a step with your heel over the edge.**
 - **Rest your hands on a support for balance.**
 - **Roll the edge or a towel and place it under your toes.**
 - **If the exercise makes your toes hurt then reduce the amount of towel underneath.**
1. Raise your heel slowly up. It should take a count of three to reach the top of the heel raise.
 2. Hold for 2 seconds.
 3. Slowly lower your heels back down. It should take a count of three to return to where you started.
 4. Repeat ___ times.
 5. Repeating the exercise _____ **times spread out over the day** is recommended.

If you have pain in the other heel, repeat on that side also but note you may not be able to manage the full amount of exercise on both sides.

Exercise 7: Single knee dips



- **Stand on one leg.**
 1. Bend your standing leg slowly. Lower yourself as far as you can without your heel coming off the ground.
 2. Slowly return to the starting position.

Repeat ___ times.

Rest for 1 minute and then do this again ___ times.

If you have any concerns or problems with the advice or exercises you should contact the healthcare professional who recommended it.

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Please contact the Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) if you require this leaflet in a different format, or would like to feedback your experience of the hospital. Email: ruh-tr.pals@nhs.net or telephone 01225 825656/ 826319.