

Falling Arches Prevention and Treatment

If you have flat feet, you're not walking the walk alone. One in four Americans has this condition – or 60 million people, according to the American Orthopaedic Foot and Ankle Society. Though flat foot is the most common foot deformity, most people can live very well with it – participating in sports and even running marathons.

“It's pain that brings people with flat feet into the doctor's office,” explains Dr. Jeffrey Brodie, a foot and ankle specialist with St. Joseph Medical Center. Most cases of flat feet, especially in children, are due to the way a person's foot develops from birth, says Brodie. Congenital flat feet are “generally asymptomatic,” says Brodie. “We don't treat painless flat feet in kids. It's a benign condition.”

But other cases of flat feet can develop over years as the posterior tibial tendon that supports the arch weakens, stretches and even tears. As a result, the arch starts to collapse. This is known as progressive flat foot.

The importance of support

“Bad shoes can contribute to it, for example if you wear shoes without arch support or a high heel and you already have problems with flat feet. If you're in a heel, your foot is working harder to balance itself,” he says. “Also, as patients gain weight and get more sedentary, the potential for injury to the tendon increases. The tendon can tear and become painful.”

Brodie explains that many patients who seek care for painful flat feet are women in their 50s and 60s, who are also overweight. The arch can begin to collapse under additional weight. “A lot of times, someone will have twisted her ankle and it doesn't get better in four to six weeks. She comes in and we discover the pain is connected to the tendon that supports the arch. Folks who have an ankle sprain that's not getting better should seek treatment.”

When pain begins

Although flat feet in young children are usually painless, the condition can become painful in adolescence or older. Sometimes, pain occurs during or after sports or other physical activity. Other times, there's aching pain at night or a tired feeling in the foot, ankle or leg. The heel can become red and painful if the Achilles tendon at the back of the ankle is involved. Calluses may form under sagging arches. All these symptoms are reasons to consult a doctor.

Prevention is the first approach to care, explains Brodie. “One thing that's helpful is daily stretching to keep the tendon supple and mobile. This can prevent flat feet from becoming a fixed deformity. The other thing is shoes with good off-the-shelf support or even custom orthotics,” he says.

Once an injury occurs, the initial treatment is rest, activity moderation and anti-inflammatory medications. “If it’s really painful, there are a variety of bracing techniques or large removable walking casts,” says Brodie.

Surgery is only considered when the tendon is torn or conservative treatment hasn’t worked. In some cases, Brodie explains that surgery may involve cutting the heel bone and realigning it, or doing a tendon transfer from the arch of the foot. In extreme instances, if the foot no longer moves, the surgeon may need to reconstruct the arch.

Despite the fact that flat feet are usually an inherited condition, doctors are seeing more adult cases of fallen arches. “It’s a dynamic process of wear and tear that occurs over years,” says Brodie. He advises that if you begin noticing that your arch is falling and your feet feel painful, consult a doctor. Fallen arches can be a serious injury that can even lead to back, hip and knee problems.

For more information or a referral to a physician who takes care of flat feet, please call the St. Joseph Doctors Directory at 410-337-1337.