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YOUR SOLE RESPONSIBILITY

PROPER FOOT CARE CAN RESULT IN LIFETIME OF KICKING UP YOUR HEELS

Connie Midey, The Arizona Republic

Observe those chubby baby feet.

At nap time, they flex back and point forward in a midair tango, until equally chubby hands grab hold and pull them mouthward for a closer examination. Later in the day, rosy toes wriggle and splay in the carpet. They're so perfect, those little feet, and they perform their work and play so effortlessly, you can't resist cradling them in your hands. So what turns those tiny, flawless tootsies into cracked, deformed and achy grown-up feet? Flip-flops, for one thing. "You have to hold them on your feet with your toes, and that contributes to hammertoes," says podiatrist Brett Roeder of Phoenix. "Flip-flops have no arch support, so you also can get stress fractures and plantar fasciitis." High heels, for another, says podiatrist David Jenkins, a professor at Midwestern University in Glendale. "Put your foot in a high-heeled, pointy-toed shoe," he says, "and it's going to jam the ball of your foot together and force more weight onto it. "Your toes will bend more, and the nerves will be more susceptible to irritation. The Achilles tendon will shorten and tighten up and put more force on the foot as well. If you have a bunion already, it will rapidly accelerate." The picture is grimmer when Roeder and Jenkins define their terms. A hammertoe bends downward like a claw, with an upward bump that rubs against your shoe. In plantar fasciitis, sometimes called a heel spur, the thick tissue on the bottom of the foot connecting to the heel is inflamed.

A bunion, which forms when the big toe angles toward the smaller toes, reminds you of its existence every time that protrusion at the base of the toe grinds against your shoe. Pretty much every waking hour, in other words. All far less attractive than the shoes that caused or worsened them, and all painful. "At the end of the day, you feel like your feet are on fire," Peg Prendergast says. The Tempe woman had outpatient surgery in September to correct a bunion on her left foot. She'll have the one on her other foot fixed later. "You use the bunion pads," says Prendergast, 55, a buyer for Changing Hands Bookstore in Tempe. "You don't wear high heels. You don't wear shoes that have a seam that touches the bunion. And finally you say, 'Enough is enough.' "

But it's not just shoes -- and not just fashionable women's shoes -- that can be dangerous to your feet. In Prendergast's case, bunions are hereditary but aggravated by shoes and being on her feet for work. She had to give up high heels 10 years ago. Other foot woes are due to aging and medical conditions over which you may have little control. The self-inflicted abuse, however, is like swinging a wrecking ball into architectural masterpieces, each constructed of 26 bones, 33 joints and more than 100 tendons, muscles and ligaments. Together, the feet account for one-fourth of all the bones in the body. "These different, oddly shaped bones are designed to support our entire body weight and mold themselves for differences in the terrain we walk on," Jenkins says. "Feet are mobile adapters and shock absorbers." Wedge them into unyielding, poorly fitting shoes, and they're unable to perform either function as intended. You'd be better off barefoot, he says, unless you have diabetes or are on a risky walking surface. Roeder says carrying extra pounds impairs performance even more. Feet absorb 1 1/2 to two times the weight of a person who's walking and up to three times the weight of

someone engaging in sports or other intense activities. "With excess weight, you're more likely to have arthritis, plantar fasciitis and bunions," Roeder says. "Foot conditions you might have had anyway are aggravated."

A good diet helps control weight and blood sugar at the same time, plus for people with diabetes, who are at greater risk for foot ailments, he says. Diet can improve overall foot health, too. Months on crutches made Nancy Driscoll of Phoenix a believer. Since fracturing her left foot in March while running, she has eliminated soft drinks from her diet and increased consumption of skim milk. She also takes calcium supplements to help strengthen her bones. "I learned that diet can be a big problem," says Driscoll, 57, who does habilitation work with adopted children. She also takes care to wear shoes with more arch support than the ones she was wearing when she injured her foot, and she walks now, several miles a day.

Jesus Yanez didn't need an injury to teach him the importance of good foot care. Up before dawn, the 42-year-old is on his feet all day as a landscape foreman and sprinkler installer and after work, too, spending time with his family and tending to his Phoenix house and yard. His feet never hurt. "I think playing sports and running when I was younger made my feet stronger," Yanez says. He takes care of them, though, wearing steel-toed boots for work and changing to fresh tennis shoes or dress shoes at home after showering. When Yanez puts his feet up at the end of a long day, it's not because they're tired. He's just taking a break to enjoy the latest episode of El Chavo with his daughter, Crystal. The myth: People easily pick up infections when they get professional pedicures, especially in small salons.

The truth: The Arizona Board of Cosmetology investigates 800 to 1,000 complaints of all kinds against nail salons every year. It finds infractions in less than 1 percent of them, Executive Director Sue Sansom says. "So 99 percent of them are doing exactly what they're supposed to be doing, exactly the way they're supposed to be doing it," she says. That includes cleaning implements with a hospital-grade disinfectant, one that kills bacteria (including pseudomonas), viruses and fungi, between clients. The board also conducts annual unannounced inspections of nail salons, and all must meet the same standards, regardless of salon size, Sansom says. Small salons have been no more likely than large ones to be cited for infractions. Sansom says getting an infection after having had a pedicure usually is nothing more than a coincidence. "But the only safe place to receive these services is in a licensed salon by a licensed individual subject to Arizona Board of Cosmetology standards," she says. She recommends checking for a prominently displayed board inspection certificate and for general cleanliness.

Clients can do their part by requesting fresh, soapy water for soaking their feet, avoiding shaving before a pedicure -- shaving leaves skin open to infection -- and not storing their pedicure tools in a box at the salon. Bacteria can grow in the box, endangering the client and the pedicurist.

Details: www.azboc.gov.

-- Connie Midey

Monthly themes

One day each month in 2006, we'll delve into the facts about bad habits you may have faced.

January: Poor eating habits.

February: Poor drinking habits.

March: Dental neglect.

April: Sedentary living.

May: Overactive living.

June: Sun and skin abuse.

JULY: FOOT ABUSE.

August: Sexual-health neglect.

September: Drug abuse.

October: Immune-system sins.

November: Smoking, chewing.

December: Stress-induced sins.

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CAPTION: 1) No caption CAPTION: 2) Peg Prendergast of Tempe suffers from painful bunions.

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