Leicestershire Partnership NHS Trust

Plantar Fasciopathy

Patient Information Leaflet

MSK Musculoskeletal Physiotherapy Service

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What is plantar fasciopathy?

Plantar fasciopathy, sometimes called plantar fasciitis, is the most common cause of heel pain.

It affects the plantar fascia, a strong band of tissue that runs from the heel to your toes. The plantar fascia helps support the arch of your foot and acts like a shock absorber when you walk, run or jump.

The plantar fascia is built to cope with daily activities such as walking, standing and running.

Pain can develop when it is placed under more strain than it is used to managing. This may cause pain around the heel and the arch of your foot.

Pain doesn't always mean damage. It often means the tissues are finding it difficult to cope with the amount of load being placed on them at that time.

Plantar fasciopathy can be painful and frustrating. However, with time, the right advice and appropriate management, most people improve and return to their usual activities.

Symptoms of plantar fasciopathy

- pain underneath the heel, which can spread into the arch of the foot

- pain that is often worse with the first few steps in a morning or after sitting/resting
- pain when pressing the heel
- pain when walking, running or standing
- rest usually relieves the pain

Why does it happen?

Plantar fasciopathy was once thought to be caused primarily by inflammation, which is why it was commonly called plantar fasciitis.

However, we now know that plantar fasciopathy is linked to how well the plantar fascia tolerates the load placed through it. Pain can develop if we put too much load on the plantar fascia, or if we ask it to do something that it isn't used to doing.

There is often no single cause that can be identified, but things that can contribute include:

- a sudden increase in exercise levels, such as lots of walking or running
- starting a new activity or returning to an activity you haven't done for a while
- spending more time standing or walking
- changes in footwear such as wearing flip flops more than usual on holiday

- reduced strength of the muscles around the foot and ankle
- being overweight or obese

Diagnosis

Plantar fasciopathy can usually be diagnosed based on the symptoms you report. Healthcare professionals will consider:

- your symptoms
- where you feel the pain
- how your symptoms change with movement or activities
- your medical history

A clinical assessment may be helpful if the cause of your symptoms is unclear, or if your symptoms do not improve after following the initial advice provided.

In many cases, scans and x-rays are **not needed**. Scans and x-rays can show what your joints, muscles, tendons, ligaments and nerves look like, but they **cannot** tell us:

- how much pain you are in
- exactly where the pain is coming from
- how well you can move or function

Many scan results show normal changes that happen as we get older. These changes are often seen in people with and without pain.

However, scans or x-rays can be helpful in some less common situations, such as:

- when a serious injury, such as a broken bone, is suspected
- when a serious condition such as an infection or cancer needs to be ruled out
- when your symptoms suggest you may need a different type of treatment, such as surgery

Your healthcare professional will be able to advise you if a scan or x-ray is needed.

Self-help

There are lots of simple ways you can help yourself to manage your plantar fascia pain.

Exercise

Complete rest is usually **not helpful**, and prolonged rest can be harmful.

The tissues in our bodies respond better to gradual movement and loading. A combination of stretching and

strengthening exercises can really help. A mild increase in pain during or after exercise can be expected, provided that it settles within a few hours afterwards.

Exercises to try:

The following exercises can help improve the strength and flexibility of the muscles around your foot and ankle.

Stretching

aim to hold each exercise for **10 – 15 secs**

repeat **3 times**

once or twice daily

1. Plantar Fascia Stretch

In sitting, place your foot on your opposite knee.

Hold your toes and pull them backwards so you feel a stretch on the bottom of your foot.

Watch the video here: https://youtu.be/kH5-HMfkin4



2. Calf Stretch



Stand facing a wall with your hands resting on the wall.

Take the painful leg behind you and keep it straight.

The non-painful leg should be in front and slightly bent.

Gently lean forwards towards the wall. You should feel a stretch in the back of your calf.

Watch the video here: https://youtu.be/EFnLllHNbQQ

Strength

aim to repeat each exercise **up to 10 times**

once or twice daily

1. Toe Curls



Place a towel on the floor with your foot on top.

Curl your toes so you scrunch the towel.

Hold for 5 seconds.

Watch the video here: https://youtu.be/FxHeokSwEes

2. Calf Raise – Level 1



Roll a small towel and place it on the floor.

Place your toes on top of the towel under both feet. Lift your heels up off the floor by pushing onto your tiptoes.

Watch the video here: https://youtu.be/PkMHAzaipVg

If you find Level 1 easy, please progress to Level 2 below:

3. Calf Raise – Level 2



Roll a small towel and place it on the floor.

Place your toes on top of the towel under the painful foot (standing on one leg).

Lift your heel up off the floor by pushing onto your tiptoes.

Watch the video here: https://youtu.be/kTdrH-8aVJc

Self Massage

aim for approximately **5 mins**

once daily

Use a frozen bottle of water with a towel wrapped around it.

Roll your foot backwards and forwards over the bottle to help provide some relief.

Alternatively, you can use a golf ball or tennis ball under the foot.

Watch the video here:
https://youtu.be/nQChHTS8Gso



Self-help continued...

Activity modification

You do not need to stop activity completely, but you may need to reduce it or change what you are doing for a short time. This may include:

- reducing how long you spend doing an activity
- reducing the speed or intensity of the activity
- reducing how often you do the activity

This should allow your pain to settle down. It is then important to gradually build your activity levels back up.

Symptom management

You may find that over-the-counter pain relief helps to manage your pain.

Before taking any medicine, make sure it is safe for you. Always follow the instructions on the packet. If you are unsure, speak to your pharmacist or GP.

You can also use heat or ice to help ease your pain.

Heat: Try a hot water bottle or wheat bag.

Ice: Try an ice pack or a bag of frozen vegetables wrapped in a towel.

Apply for up to 20 minutes at a time. You can repeat this every 2 to 3 hours if needed.

Do not place heat or ice directly on your skin, as this may cause burns or skin damage.

Footwear

Comfortable and supportive footwear may help reduce symptoms. Some people find insoles or gel heel cups in the shoe can also help relieve symptoms.

However, there is a lack of high-quality evidence to support this.

If you decide to try these, they should be used alongside an exercise programme rather than as a replacement for exercise.

Weight management

Maintaining a healthy weight can help to reduce the load placed on your muscles, joints and bones.

This may improve pain and movement, making everyday activities easier. Even a small amount of weight loss can make a difference, particularly for weight-bearing areas such as the spine, hips, knees and feet.

Healthy weight management is best achieved through:

- gradual, long-term changes
- eating a balanced diet
- being physically active and reducing time spent sitting
- setting realistic goals
- making small, sustainable changes

This can lead to lasting improvements in both your physical health and overall wellbeing.

For more information on eating well and to support weight management visit www.leicestershirewms.co.uk/

Taping

If the measures above have not helped improve your symptoms, you could also try taping the foot to help provide some relief.

Ask a healthcare professional for advice before trying this, particularly if you have sensitive skin or a known allergy to adhesive tape.

How long does it take to improve?

Recovery time can vary considerably from person to person.

Most people will notice some improvements within 8 to 12 weeks of starting exercise and modifying their activity levels.

However, full recovery can take several months, especially if you have had pain for a long time.

Flare-ups of pain can happen during recovery and are a normal part of this process.

Although progress can be slow, perseverance and consistency are important. Managing flare-ups well can help you return to the activities that matter to you.

When should I seek further help?

You may wish to seek further advice from a physiotherapist if:

- your pain is not improving
- your pain is getting worse
- your pain is affecting your ability to work, perform daily chores or do the hobbies you enjoy
- you have repeated episodes of heel pain, especially if you also have any of the following:
    - other ongoing joint or tendon problems
    - psoriasis
    - uveitis
    - Crohn's disease
    - ulcerative colitis

You should **urgently** contact NHS 111 or attend an urgent treatment centre or A&E if you experience any of the following:

- a sudden sharp pain or 'snap' in the bottom of your foot
- sudden bruising or swelling in the area following an injury
- difficulty walking or putting your foot to the floor following an injury

Remember

Plantar fasciopathy is very common and usually improves with the right advice and management.

The best management for plantar fasciopathy is a progressive exercise programme.

Complete rest is usually not required, but modifying activity levels to help control the pain can be beneficial.

Recovery takes time and consistency; you may not see big changes happen quickly.

Acknowledgements

Images used with kind permission from www.rehabmypatient.com

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If you need help to understand this leaflet or would like it in a different language or format such as large print, Braille or audio, please ask a member of staff.

MSK Physiotherapy Service

Find out more about the MSK Physiotherapy Service and what we offer www.leicspart.nhs.uk/service/musculoskeletal-msk-therapy-physiotherapy/

Further Resources

Access our other MSK Physiotherapy resources www.leicspart.nhs.uk/msk-physiotherapy-resources-getting-started/

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