

Health Matters – April 2010

Fit Feet for the Season

Winter is officially behind us in the St. Croix River Valley. Season changes usually result in activity changes which, unfortunately, can lead to injury if we aren't cautious. As a foot and ankle specialist, I would like to pass on a few recommendations to help keep your feet healthy while you enjoy the new season.

Many of us take to the streets to enjoy the sunshine. Shedding a few extra pounds that winter may have imparted is a common spring and summer goal. Whatever your activity, easing into things is the best way to avoid being sidelined.

Excessive pace and distance too early in your routine without enough rest will undoubtedly lead to trouble. This has been referred to as the "terrible too's" - too much, too soon, too fast with too little rest. Add distance to your workout slowly - no greater than a ten percent increase per week - with at least one day of rest.

For those who are walkers, joggers and runners, environmental conditions need to be factored. The undulating terrain of the river valley can be beneficial in appropriate increments. However, be sure to incorporate hills slowly (if at all) and dedicate a portion of your distance to flat surfaces. Hill exercise, either ascending or descending, can easily result in excess impact and strains.

Also consider the surfaces of the terrain. If you exercise indoors, treadmill decks should be forgiving. Streets and sidewalks are inferior shock absorbers compared to dirt trails, tracks and grass. Streets are typically canted so reversing the direction of your route or choosing additional courses will reduce prolonged abnormal forces on your back and lower extremities. Additionally, don't underestimate the benefit of cross training. Incorporating bicycling, swimming, rowing, etc. to your routine will not only maintain cardiovascular fitness, but also reduce the likelihood of impact and overuse related injuries.

Shoe selection is also important. Keep your running shoes for running and your casual shoes for everyday use. Running shoes are not designed for use on the tennis court and vice versa. Also, most of us don't replace our shoes frequently enough. The recommended life span of a running shoe is 300-500 miles, which typically translates to 4-6 months. Shoes lose their structural integrity far sooner than the sole and outer portion appears worn. Furthermore, every shoe fits every foot differently. When searching, remember to try multiple brands and have your foot professionally sized as most of us wear sizes smaller than we should. As a general rule, if you have a higher arch than average a cushioned shoe will aid in shock absorption. If you have a low to flat arch, a stability type of shoe will add extra support. Invest in a well-constructed shoe made with quality breathable materials.

Remember to ease into any new shoes. Wear them around inside your home before hitting the streets to ensure a proper fit. Check for "hot spots" which are precursors to blisters and calluses. Common aches, pains and injuries this time of year include ball of foot and heel pain. Pain in the ball of the foot or metatarsalgia can be caused by several issues. Stress fractures, joint capsule inflammation, hammer toes, bunions or a nerve entrapment may be the culprit. You should be evaluated for swelling, bruising, stiffness or burning pain, and an x-ray may be warranted. Avoid wearing high-heels or wedges which increase the pressure in this area.

Pain in the bottom of the heel is commonly plantar fasciitis but may also be caused by other issues. This pain is typically worse with the first steps after a period of rest but may persist as standing or walking continues. Try gently stretching the calves and bottoms of your feet. Ice helps to reduce inflammation. Avoid going barefoot to help ease this pain. If symptoms persist, a visit to your doctor is recommended.

Enjoy the new season and all the opportunities that the warm weather has to offer. Stay active and remember to ease into new activities and listen carefully to your body. Aches and pains may represent an injury requiring attention.



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