

What does your footprint say about YOU?

Did you know that your feet are the key to unlocking many of your health and general wellbeing issues? Here's why it's time to pay them some attention...

If the thought of getting your feet out on a beach has you longing for autumn and your trusty opaque tights, you're not alone. According to a survey by Scholl, 33% of us are embarrassed by our feet, while more than half of us admit to actively avoiding taking our shoes or socks off in public.

'The problem is, people neglect their feet until something goes wrong,' says Matthew Fitzpatrick, a consultant podiatrist. 'We take them for granted from the second we swing them out of bed in the morning.'

Our feet are incredibly complex: each foot has 26 bones, 33 joints and more than 100 ligaments, muscles and tendons, and injuries are fairly common. Almost a third of GP consultations for musculoskeletal problems are about foot pain.

What's more, keeping our feet in shape is vital for our all-round wellbeing. Not only are they the foundation of good posture (think taller, slimmer, younger) and preventing problems such as knee and hip pain, but research has suggested that foot pain can increase the risk of serious falls. The good news is that studies show that the odds can be reduced with a simple workout for the feet (see opposite page).

What your footprints mean...

While there's no such thing as the 'perfect' foot, according to Matthew, a healthy one acts like a tripod to keep us stable, with the weight spread evenly between big toe, little toe and heel. Your big toe should be straight, in line with the other toes, there should also be a slight arch to the foot's inside edge, and some room between the toes.

However, it's not necessarily a problem if the outline your foot leaves on the beach doesn't look like the footprints stamped across dreamy holiday adverts, with a slender mid-foot, elegantly tapering off towards the heel.

'Often, the typical footprint you see in pictures is a foot with a very high arch, but actually this can be just as problematic in terms of injury risk and pain as a very flat foot,' says Matthew.

'But if you're looking at your footprint in the sand this summer and worrying that

it's significantly different to a lot of other people's, the best thing you can do

is go and see a podiatrist,' he adds. 'Ideally, we should all think about our feet in the same way we think about going to the dentist: making regular appointments with a professional rather than just when there's a problem.'

'A healthy foot acts like a tripod to keep us stable'

PSSST...
Hairy toes may not be something you want to shout about, but they are a sign of healthy circulation, as hair follicles need a good blood supply to nourish them.

5 SIMPLE STEPS TO FITTER FEET...

1 WAKE-UP CALL
Before springing out of bed in the morning, give the muscles in your foot a chance to wake up properly. 'Spend a few minutes in bed just moving your feet around, giving everything a bit of a stretch and getting the muscles firing before you expect them to bear your weight,' says Matthew. 'I try to do this every day.'

2 WORK YOUR CORE
The foot has 'core' muscles too – that is, lots of small but vital muscles that support balance and movement. 'These are called intrinsic muscles and they're essentially additional stabilisers, which balance the way the foot works,' explains Matthew. 'They help stabilise all the small joints, as well as the bigger ones, so that everything locks into position at the right time as we move. If they're not quite firing at the right time, it can predispose you to things like claw

toes and hammer toes, and even exacerbate bunion formation.'

For a 'foot core' workout, try picking up a pencil or a tissue with your toes, suggests Matthew. Alternatively, you could try writing the letters of the alphabet in the air.

3 GOOD TOES, NAUGHTY TOES
To maintain strength and mobility in your toes, Zoe Birch, a chartered physiotherapist at PhysioMotion in London, recommends this exercise using a resistance band. Loop the band around one toe and then flex it towards you. While flexing, try curling your toe up against the pull of the band. Repeat with each toe. 'Don't worry if the other toes move as you do this; the toe with the band is still working the hardest,' says Zoe. 'The only people I know who can move their toes individually like fingers are ballet dancers and that's because they've trained for years.' →

4 ARCH ENEMIES

The arches of our feet naturally fall as we age.

To protect yours, sports scientists at Ithaca College in New York recommend the following exercise: sit in a chair and, with your feet flat on the floor, try lifting the arch of one foot. Don't let your leg move or your toes bunch up. It's only a tiny movement, but you should feel a slight contraction and see your foot getting slightly shorter as the arch lifts a little. Repeat with the other foot. Once you get the hang of that, try it standing up.

5 BALANCING ACT

It's not just the mechanics of our feet that help to keep us balanced: the muscles and

joints are also loaded with tiny sensors that send signals to our brains about how our bodies are moving, and where they are in relation to things around us and the type of surface we're standing on. However, this feedback deteriorates as we age, says Matthew Fitzpatrick. 'So a good thing to practise is standing on one leg – ideally with something to hold on to. This keeps the sensors stimulated and helps train them to fire more quickly when you need them.' Once you find this easy, try it with your eyes closed, which is much harder.

'It's fine to wear high heels and flip-flops – but not all the time'

Get shoe shopping

One of the best things we can do for our feet is to vary the type of shoes we wear, says Matthew. This stops the muscles and other soft tissues being stressed and strained in any one particular way for a long period of time. 'It's fine to wear high heels, flip-flops or ballet pumps – but not all the time,' he says. 'Shoes like this aren't very supportive, which means you have to curl your toes so the shoes don't fall off; this means the muscles are working in an abnormal way. But I wouldn't advise wearing trainers all the time, either. So vary your footwear to protect the feet.'

EXPERT TIP

Try new shoes on in the afternoon. 'Our feet swell as the day goes on,' says Matthew. 'If you try them on at 8am, they might feel tight by the evening.'



OUCH! WHAT CAN YOU DO ABOUT BUNIONS?

● A bunion is a bony lump that forms on the joint where the big toe meets the foot, meaning the big toe starts to move in towards the other toes.

The lump itself can be painful and it can cause problems with the second and third toes. The only long-term solution for bunions is surgery, according to Kumar Kunasingam, a consultant orthopaedic surgeon who specialises in foot and ankle surgery.

● While there are products available that may make life more comfortable in the short-term, such as Sole Bliss shoes, which are specially designed

to cushion and accommodate bunions without looking too orthopaedic (from £149, solebliss.com) – they're not going to have any effect on the shape of the bones of the feet, which is the fundamental problem with bunions, says Kumar.

● It's a myth that bunions are caused by high heels. 'They're hereditary, and can be passed down from mum or dad,' says Kumar. 'In fact, I've had many patients who've never worn heels in their life.'

● The good news is that whereas before, surgery to correct a bunion typically

involved a six- to eight-week recovery period, there are now newer techniques that make it much quicker. 'I now offer what I call keyhole bunion surgery, which is less painful, and the recovery is faster,' says Kumar, who works in the NHS and also sees patients privately through Ramsay Health Care. 'Rather than one large incision, it involves five tiny ones to access the bones in the toe, and smaller screws to lock the bones in place. It takes an average of 30 minutes and people can walk out of hospital the same day. The bandages can usually come off after two weeks, and people can get on with lives.'

Sole Bliss Shoes, from £149

