

SPECIAL FITNESS ISSUE: THE FOOT

Work that toe! Work it!

Yes, feet need exercise to stay strong and flexible. Stretching classes and tools help.

By Janet Cromley, Times Staff Writer
January 1, 2007



Warm-up

THEY may never pull a locomotive with their toes, but a few intrepid fitness pioneers are diligently exercising their feet with the dedication of true believers.

And they may be on to something. Many podiatrists believe that putting feet through a simple exercise regimen designed to build up foot strength and flexibility can save some folks a world of hurt.

"A lot of injuries we see can be prevented if you have stronger feet," says Dr. Noreen Oswell, chief of podiatric surgery at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles. And though podiatrists have many recommendations for preventing injuries (such as wearing proper shoes), only one thing, they say, will directly strengthen the feet — and that's exercise.

Regularly exercising your southernmost appendages can strengthen muscles of the foot and ankle, warding off tendonitis, plantar fasciitis and good old-fashioned foot pain, says Dr. Douglas Richie, a podiatrist in Seal Beach and past president of the American Academy of Podiatric Sports Medicine.

A toned, strengthened foot, furthermore, can reduce the occurrence of "sore, aching feet," which are often the result of muscle fatigue.

Regular exercise can also improve flexibility, thus boosting mobility.

Most people who seek out foot exercises — generally athletes and folks who are on their feet a lot — do so with physical therapists or trainers. But an elite few go a different route: foot fitness classes, in which students assemble for regular muscle-strengthening workouts.

Finding these classes takes a little legwork. "It's not like you can open up a catalog to a college and say, 'Oh, foot aerobics!'" says Carolyn Sery, a sales rep and dedicated foot exerciser.

Sery has been taking foot fitness classes off and on for almost three years, ever since painful bunions made standing on the job increasingly difficult. She was introduced to the concept by exercise instructor Shuriu Lo, who was training her in Pilates at the time.

On a recent Friday morning, we paid a visit to Lo's new studio at 2020 Fitness in Long Beach, to learn what goes on at a foot fitness class.

Lo and three students sat in a circle on stools at the homey mom-and-pop Pilates and

Gyrotonics studio and commenced their weekly 30-minute foot exercise routine without any ceremony or small talk.

They knew the exercises by heart, and moved into and out of them with the precision of a well-trained drill team.

They scrunched their toes like little inchworms, scooting the foot forward and back.

They raised their toes, then lowered them one at a time, starting with the littlest.

They interlaced their fingers in their toes, rotated each foot and walked over small rubber domes known as wakers.

Then, toward the end, the students repeated some of the exercises while standing on a "hypergravity platform" — a vibrating exercise device that provided a little shake-n-bake foot buzz.

Thirty minutes a week may not sound like much, but Sery credits it with helping her stay longer on her feet — and with less pain — during her job servicing accounts at greeting card stores. She also believes it has helped her avoid surgery.

"Standing for long periods is tiring and painful unless I do my foot class exercises," she says.

To supplement the benefits of the class, she has her own personal pair of toe stretchers that she wears when she can: soft, pliable devices worn on the feet that fan the toes outward, forcing a little extra space between them.

Although there isn't empirical evidence proving their efficacy, some physical therapists and their clients believe the stretchers improve flexibility and reduce pain.

Foot fitness isn't exactly a booming business, but a number of physical therapists and trainers do incorporate the principles into their practice.

For example, Marie-José Blom-Lawrence, director of Long Beach Dance Conditioning and Angel City Body Kinetics, and an instructor of anatomy and physiology at Loyola Marymount University's department of dance, is a big proponent of foot exercises — instructing trainers in foot fitness and lecturing on the topic at workshops.

She believes that certain orthopedic problems, such as back pain, can often be traced to the feet. "The feet are carrying and organizing your body," she says.

She thinks it's a shame that when most of us formulate a fitness plan, feet are the last thing we consider.

"When we think of the feet, it's related to fashion and not health," she says.

"People work out, and go and have pedicures, and it's all for the outside. They're not paying attention to the structure of the foot."

Kim Finklestein, a physical therapist at Postureworks in Santa Monica, also includes foot

therapy and foot fitness instruction as part of her practice. She even has a "toe mobilization" program, designed to restore flexibility of the toes.

The system includes "tractions" each toe, which involves pulling the toe, twisting it gently clockwise and counterclockwise, then "scissoring" the toes — pushing one toe up, while pushing the toe next to it down.

Ruth Phillips of Century City says the toe mobilization system worked well for her problem: a crooked second toe. Finklestein, she says, was able to straighten that toe over the course of a month of triweekly toe-stretching treatments.

Finklestein encourages clients contemplating surgery for bunions or hammer toes to consider exercising first. She also endorses weekly wearing of toe stretchers to stave off injury.

"Toe stretching improves jumping, flexibility, mobility, strength and balance, which translates into more efficient movement," she says.

She even goes so far as to say that exercise can alter the form of the foot — which is not as far-fetched as it sounds, according to Richie.

It's not an everyday occurrence, but he says he's seen people "literally raise the arch with persistent exercise."

The beauty of foot fitness, Lo says, is that the exercises are simple and can be done at home. The tools are even simpler — primarily tennis balls and rubber domes to roll the feet over.

Sery has found that embarking on a foot fitness regimen has some unexpected perks: It's great fodder for cocktail party conversation or an ice breaker when talking to clients.

"I tell them about my foot class, and I have them all in stitches," she says. "When I tell people I've got Japanese toe stretchers, they tend to picture me hanging upside down."

And there are other, less tangible benefits, says Erin Holloway, who also attends Lo's class.

"Feet are truly a metaphor for how you move through life," says Holloway, a licensed acupuncturist and health education specialist. "If your feet are hurting, you're not going to want to walk on them — and move forward with your goals, with your life."

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(INFOBOX BELOW)

Strength builders

Want to put your feet through a workout? The following exercises are relatively simple and can be done at home. They're only a few of the many exercises recommended by foot experts, however. To expand your repertoire and ensure you're doing the exercises properly, you may wish to attend a foot fitness class or consult with a foot specialist.

- The towel curl. This is one of the safest exercises, says Seal Beach podiatrist Dr. Douglas Richie. While sitting with feet flat on the floor, try to grip a small towel by curling the toes over the towel. Even if you are not able to actually grip the towel, the attempt is still good exercise. To exercise the individual toes, try this with marbles or tissues. This exercise strengthens toes and arches.
- The calf raise. In a standing position, raise and lower the heels off the floor while rolling up onto the balls of the feet. Do this while bending the toes into the floor as if standing on tiptoe. A more ambitious variation of the drill is to do it one foot at a time. This exercise strengthens the arch, toes and Achilles tendon. Do not do this if you have a strained arch, as you could strain the arch further.
- The tennis ball roll. While seated or standing, roll the foot gently over a small ball, such as a tennis ball. This is good for maintaining the arch.
- The toe massage. While sitting with one foot on the opposite knee, massage the ball of the foot, in between each metatarsal. Repeat with the other foot.

— Janet Cromley