

# Happy Feet

## Foot Care Tips for Active Women

By Casey Flynn

**F**eet are the wheels of the body. Chore-runners, dog-chasers, road-racers, pedal-pushers—they are the foundation of an active life. If your feet are unhealthy or injured, all your daily activities become more difficult. For active women, foot care is essential to maintain a high quality of life and engage in adventure.

The body needs a solid base. “If the feet are not well-aligned or not comfortable, you’re going to have compensation and change occur up your entire body,” says Dr. Karen A. Langone, sports medicine podiatrist. “An unstable foot base is not going to allow the ankle, the knee, or the back to remain stable and function as well as it should function.”

Proper footwear selection for daily and active use promotes a healthy and stable foundation. Look for good support and fit when choosing shoes. “Make sure you feel really comfortable right off the bat,” says Dr. Langone. If the shoe isn’t comfortable when you try it on, it is unlikely to get any more comfortable over time.

What you wear at home or at work determines how your feet feel when exercising. High-heels and narrow toe boxes common in women’s formal footwear can cause Achilles tendon problems and deformities like bunions and hammer toe, according to Dr. Alison J. Garten, podiatrist and Certified Pedorthist specializing in footwear and supportive devices for the feet. Flat, flexible shoes that give no arch support can bring about plantar fasciitis, an inflammation of the tissue near the heel bone, and other injuries.

Shop at specialty stores for your sport where the staff is well trained, and let them know of any problems you’ve had in the past. Consider an evaluation from a podiatrist and custom insoles or orthotics if you have recurring problems.

Let’s take a look at some of the common issues for each sport and how to prevent them:

### Running

“When you run, you put twice the amount of body weight on your feet, joints, muscles, and nerves,” says Dr. Garten. A good running shoe can reduce the amount of pressure on your joints by 40–50 percent and lower the risk of overuse injuries like plantar fasciitis, Achilles tendonitis, and stress fractures in the feet.

Cross-training brings balance to the feet and body, making runners less prone to injury. “If you stick with one exercise, it can create an overuse syndrome because you’re not focusing on all the joints and the muscles of your feet. You’re only training them for that one specific activity,” Dr. Garten says. Ease into new sports gradually and allow your body to adapt to the new movements.

The growing popularity of barefoot and minimalist running has come with an increase in stress fractures and other foot problems. Education on proper use and running form helps reduce the chance of injury. Most people can incorporate minimalist footwear into their training, but it is important to work slowly through transitional shoe gear to a less supportive shoe over months or even years.

### Hiking and Backpacking

The added stresses from long days, uneven ground, and the weight of a pack require a more supportive shoe or boot with a solid shank. Try cushioning insoles to help diminish the high impact forces. When selecting a boot, bring a fully loaded pack and hiking socks into the store to mimic backpacking conditions.

Acute trauma, like twists and sprains, is more common when traveling on trails with a pack. “For hikers, I suggest stabilizing exercises for prevention,” says Dr. Nadia Levy, podiatrist at the Center for Podiatric Care and Sports Medicine. Stabilizing and strengthening the feet and ankles protect hikers when their bodies are stressed on rocky or uneven terrain, Dr. Levy says.

### Cycling

Switching from flat, platform pedals to clipless pedals or one with a toe cage helps to improve technique and reduce injury. “If you’re not locking your foot in, you’re creating a muscle imbalance in your legs, developing very strong quads and very tight hamstrings,” says Dr. Garten. “That can end up causing knee problems as well as foot problems because you’re constantly pushing off and straining the ball of your foot.”

The intense pressure of a cyclist’s body weight bearing down onto the foot for long peri-

ods of time can cause hot foot, an impingement of the nerves in the ball of the foot that leads to burning pain, according to Dr. Langone. Avoid slim-fitting shoes that squeeze the ball of the foot and try insoles that have risers in the metatarsal area for prevention.

### Swimming

Swimming is a great cross-training and recovery activity because the stresses on the foot are very low. Avid swimmers can sometimes experience Achilles problems, bone bruises, and tendonitis from pushing off the wall too aggressively or from improper kick patterns.

Swimmers more commonly encounter skin issues like warts, athlete’s foot, or foot fungus from the moist pool environment. Minimize contact with the surface outside the pool by wearing sandals and be sure to wash your feet well after swimming and dry thoroughly between your toes.

Listen to your body. Try to avoid dramatic increases in training volumes and pushing through discomfort. If something starts to hurt, ask yourself, “What have I changed in my training? Did I run/bike/swim farther or faster than usual?” Ease off and allow yourself to recover.

If you do have an injury and your doctor tells you to refrain from your sport, don’t give up hope. “You might have to modify your activity level or change what activity you’re doing at that time until you can get back to doing the things you really love,” says Dr. Garten. “But don’t stop exercising.”

## Cosmetic Care for Active Feet

- Trim your nails straight across to avoid ingrown toenails. Keep the length even or behind the tip of your toe to prevent your toenails from hitting against the front of your shoe, which can damage the root.
- Stay away from over-the-counter corn removers. See a podiatrist to treat the cause of the problem.
- For pedicures, be sure that pedicurists use new or sterilized equipment, or bring your own. And don’t let them cut your cuticles, which are protective barriers for your nail.