HEEL PAIN: Don’t Ignore the Symptoms

With days becoming longer and temperatures on the rise, it can only mean that summer has nearly arrived. If your winter has consisted mainly of Netflix® marathons and frequent refrigerator runs, don’t assume that you are ready to meet this summer’s activities at the same level with which you left.

As you throw off your confining winter shoes and slip into the ease of “flip-flops,” or exit the slow pace of home and head out to the courts, you may encounter one of the most common ailments of the summer—heel pain. So, if your first step of the morning causes a sharp, shooting pain in your heel, it may be plantar fasciitis. This is one of the most common causes of heel pain.

Plantar fasciitis occurs when the ligament (the plantar fascia) that runs across the bottom of your foot, connecting your heel bone to your toes, becomes inflamed and pulls when you step. Typically, after you stand and walk your calf muscles warm up and the pain goes away, but might return after long periods of standing or sitting.

Here are some things to consider:

- The condition is most common in women ages 40 - 60 and usually begins gradually in one foot.
- One cause of plantar fasciitis is increased or high-demand activities such as running or dancing.
• You are more susceptible if you are flat-footed, have a high arch, or are obese.
• Often plantar fasciitis results from wearing flip-flops or flat shoes with no arch support.
• High-heeled shoes can promote plantar fasciitis by contracting and shortening the Achilles tendon.

When it comes to fashion shoes, moderation is the key. On a day when you're wearing heels, flats, or flip-flops, find time to wear supportive shoes, such as a good pair of sneakers or other firm-soled shoes with arch support. As a rule, a flat shoe with a sole that you can bend in half does not provide good support.

Untreated, plantar fasciitis can develop into chronic heel pain and can even affect your foot, knee, hip, or back if your gait or posture changes to accommodate the pain.

If you suspect that you have plantar fasciitis, apply ice to your heel in 20-minute increments several times per day, stretch your calf muscles and heel, and wear only supportive shoes. If this eliminates your pain, continue with the stretches and supportive shoes to prevent a recurrence.

If the pain doesn't resolve within a week, a foot and ankle specialist can rule out a more serious condition such as a tear in the Achilles tendon, a fracture of the heel bone, or stress fracture. Occasionally, the pain could be caused by bone tumors or nerve entrapment near the area.

The specialist will ask you to describe your pain and any triggers. He will also look for areas of tenderness and try to pinpoint it. Sometimes an imaging test such as an X-ray or MRI will help rule out other causes of heel pain.

Here are some ways to manage/prevent your heel pain:
• Heel pain caused by plantar fasciitis is managed with over-the-counter/anti-inflammatory medications, ice, rest, stretching, and proper footwear. Sometimes orthotic devices are used to compensate for foot structure issues that aggravate the problem.

• Physical therapy can help you learn stretches to manage your condition.

• In rare cases, cortisone injections or surgical treatment may be required.

• You can prevent plantar fasciitis by wearing supportive shoes and stretching your calves and heels regularly.

While heel pain from plantar fasciitis is not dangerous to you, it is easiest to treat in its earliest stages. So don't ignore the symptoms. Again—seek treatment after one week if the pain doesn't go away with rest, ice, stretching, and supportive footwear.

—Zachary Ritter, DPM, Williamsport, PA, PPMA Board Member