EXERCISE PROGRAMME

Plantar fasciitis (heel pain) and your exercise programme

Plantar fasciitis is the most common cause of pain under the heel in adults. It affects the plantar fascia, a thick band of tissue that runs from the heel bone to the toes and supports the arch of the foot. Stretching, strengthening and simple changes to footwear and activity are the main treatments, and you can do them at home.

At a glance

How often	Stretches every day; strengthening every other day
Is some pain OK?	Yes. Mild discomfort during exercise is fine if it settles by the next morning
How long until it helps	Usually several months; it can take a year or longer to settle completely
Footwear	Cushioned, supportive shoes; avoid walking barefoot and flat, thin-soled shoes
Weight	If you are overweight, even a small weight loss reduces the load on your heel

What it feels like

- Pain under the heel, often towards the inner side
- Pain that is worst with the **first steps in the morning** or after sitting, and eases after a few minutes of walking
- Pain that returns after long periods of standing or walking, or at the end of the day

It usually affects one foot but can affect both.

Why it happens

The plantar fascia becomes painful when it is overloaded. Things that increase the risk include:

- age between about 40 and 60
- being overweight
- standing or walking for long periods, especially on hard floors
- a sudden increase in walking, running or sport
- tight calf muscles or a tight Achilles tendon
- unsupportive footwear, or walking barefoot on hard surfaces

How it is diagnosed

The diagnosis is usually made from your symptoms and an examination, and no scans are needed. An X-ray, ultrasound or MRI scan may be arranged if the diagnosis is unclear or symptoms are not improving. A heel spur seen on an X-ray is common in people without heel pain and is not usually the cause.

Treatment

- **Exercise:** the stretches and strengthening exercises below are the first-line treatment.
- **Footwear:** wear cushioned shoes with a supportive arch and a slightly raised heel, including indoors. Avoid flip-flops, slippers and walking barefoot.
- **Insoles and heel cups:** off-the-shelf arch supports or silicone heel cups can help.
- **Activity:** cut back on long walks, standing and high-impact exercise for a while, and swap to cycling or swimming to keep fit.
- **Painkillers and ice:** these can ease symptoms in the short term. Rolling the foot over a frozen water bottle for up to 10 minutes can help.
- **Night splints** hold the foot in a gentle stretch overnight and help some people with severe morning pain.
- **If symptoms persist after 6 months or more** despite these measures, other options may be discussed, such as shockwave therapy or a steroid injection. A steroid injection may give short-term relief but carries a small risk of thinning the heel fat pad or weakening the plantar fascia. Surgery is rarely needed.

Using pain as a guide

Some discomfort during the exercises is normal. Keep pain at **5 out of 10 or below** during exercise, and make sure it **settles by the next morning**. If your heel is worse the next day, do fewer repetitions or use the easier version, then build up again.

Your home exercise programme

Daily stretches

- **Plantar fascia stretch:** sit and cross the affected foot over your other knee. Hold your toes and pull them gently back towards your shin until you feel a stretch in the arch. Hold for 10 seconds and repeat 10 times. Do this 3 times a day, and **always before your first steps in the morning** and after long periods of sitting.
- **Calf stretch, straight knee:** stand facing a wall with your hands on it. Step the affected leg back, keep the knee straight and the heel on the floor, and lean forwards until you feel a stretch in the calf. Hold for 30 seconds, 3 times, twice a day.
- **Calf stretch, bent knee:** as above, but bend the back knee slightly to feel the stretch lower down. Hold for 30 seconds, 3 times, twice a day.
- **Foot roll:** sit and roll the arch of your foot back and forth over a tennis ball or a frozen water bottle for 1 to 2 minutes. This is helpful for pain relief, especially in the evening.

Strengthening, every other day

- **High-load heel raise with towel:** roll up a small towel and place it under your toes on the edge of a step or on the floor, so your toes are bent upwards. Stand on the affected leg, holding a rail or wall for balance. Rise up onto your toes over 3 seconds, hold at the top for 2 seconds, and lower over 3 seconds.
  - Weeks 1 to 2: 3 sets of 12
  - Weeks 3 to 4: 4 sets of 10, wearing a backpack with some books in it
  - Week 5 onwards: 5 sets of 8, adding weight to the backpack as you get stronger
  - Rest for 2 minutes between sets. *Easier:* do it on both feet, or without the towel.
- **Towel scrunches:** sit with your foot flat on a towel on the floor. Scrunch the towel towards you using your toes, keeping your heel on the floor. 3 sets of 10.
- **Arch lift (short foot):** sit or stand with your foot flat. Draw the ball of the foot towards the heel to raise the arch, without curling the toes. Hold for 5 seconds and repeat 10 times.

When to seek medical advice

Get urgent help (NHS 111 or A&E) if:

- your foot is hot, red and swollen, especially if you feel unwell or have a high temperature
- you have injured your foot and cannot put weight on it

Stop the exercises and seek advice if:

- you have numbness, tingling or burning in the foot
- pain is present all the time, even at rest, or wakes you at night
- you have pain in both heels together with pain or swelling in other joints, or back pain and stiffness
- pain started after a big increase in activity and the sides of the heel are tender to squeeze, which can be a sign of a stress fracture
- there is no improvement after about 3 months of regular exercise and footwear changes

Sources

This guide is based on Mr Umar's practice and follows NICE Clinical Knowledge Summaries (plantar fasciitis), NICE interventional procedures guidance IPG311 (shockwave therapy for refractory plantar fasciitis) and published exercise programmes for plantar heel pain, including the plantar fascia-specific stretching programme and high-load strength training.

Questions?

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This is general guidance. Always follow the specific instructions from your own clinical and physiotherapy team, as your programme may differ.

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