

Oh My Aching Feet!

©Vicki Anderson



Dr. William Scholl, designer of the Dr. Scholl's foot product line, often commented, "When your feet hurt, you hurt all over." Ain't that the truth?! Your efficiency level, concentration, willingness to work and attitude greatly decrease when you are experiencing foot pain. Detecting foot problems and resolving them quickly can also prevent injury to the knees, hips or back caused by adjusting to a painful foot, which is potentially more expensive, more severe and more difficult to relieve.

Many longarm quilters have their machine or studio space over concrete floors, which can be damaging to the lower extremities because it provides minimal resistance and no shock absorbency. Think about it. Standing all day at your machine can cause a decrease in the blood supply to the lower extremities and therefore increases fatigue and soreness in the muscles. Also, prolonged standing creates an accumulation of blood in certain areas of the feet and legs, which can result in varicose veins. I don't know about you, but in my house spider webs are banned—especially on my legs! In addition, the continuous pressure on a person's feet causes bone misalignment and joint degeneration. Ow! That hurts just to write about it.

All of this pressure can lead to stretching and straining of the plantar fascia, the tissue along the bottom of your foot that connects your heel bone to your toes. Plantar fasciitis is often associated with heel pain, but it involves more than the heel. People who stand on their feet all day (hello—longarm quilters?) are susceptible to this problem because of the amount of stress that is placed on the heel bone and the constant wear and tear of the connective tissues.

There are certain stretching exercises that can be done in the morning, at lunch and at the end of the day that will keep the muscles and ligaments warmed up and prepared to handle the physical stress of the day. Rolling a tennis ball or an ordinary 12-ounce can, such as frozen juice, under the arch of each foot for five minutes a foot is very useful in stretching the plantar fascia that runs along the arch of the foot. The cold also reduces the inflammation. Picking up a towel or a marble off the ground with your toes 30 times per foot stretches the forefoot muscles and the plantar muscles and tendons in the feet, and sends your family into peals of laughter at your expense. These are the supporting muscles in the foot and are therefore the most important to warm up each day in order to prevent excessive strain and inflammation that can result in serious pain and damage.

Stretching the calf muscles by leaning against a wall with one knee bent and the other leg straight out behind you with both feet flat on the floor can be extremely beneficial. The plantar fascia attaches at the calcaneal and cuboidal bones and is stretched during these calf exercises. Dancing with your machine and not standing for hours with your knees locked is also beneficial. Stretching, resting, elevating and icing both feet for an hour after standing all day will decrease swelling and help rejuvenate the feet for the following day. Icing an adult beverage sometimes give immediate relief. Just a thought...

It's a given that anti-fatigue mats help to reduce back pain and stress when standing for long periods of time. These mats are designed to decrease the stress on the feet and legs by providing a cushioning surface for people to stand on over prolonged periods of time. They do this by forcing the leg and feet muscles to continually constrict and relax thus facilitating the venous blood flow back toward the heart. If blood is permitted to pool in the legs, oxygen can't get to muscles efficiently, allowing a buildup of lactic acid and leading to fatigue and cramping.

There are several types of anti-fatigue mats available to us. A visit to my local home improvement center offered three types— a runner, sold by the foot, a large rubber square with an open-hole construction, and the interlocking 'puzzle' foam mats. This last selection seems to be the most widely favored by longarm quilters. There are gel mats available that also cushion quite well. It's sort of like walking on giant shoe inserts. They are a little pricier than the foam mats, but we are talking about saving our bodies, so the extra expense may be well worth it. Gel mats often have a longer life than the foam floor mats. And new on the market is a composite, polyurethane foam mat.

Do your feet, and knees, a favor—find a mat that works for your studio, and your budget.