

An exciting treatment for heel pain

By J.R. Stepps

more and more people are now walking for fitness. This could explain why heel pain is one of the fastest growing foot problems in America. If you are suffering from heel pain, here a few questions to ask yourself. Is the pain worse when you first put weight on the area in the morning, then it eases after being up for awhile? Does the pain return as the day continues? Do you have any pain after resting or relaxing for a short period? Does your heel pain interfere with everyday activities? If you answered yes to any of these questions, you should seek advice about the options available to help relieve your pain.

Several million Americans suffer from plantar fasciitis, the most common type of heel pain. Inflammation, overuse and injury can cause this painful condition. Symptoms include sharp pain and stiffness on the bottom of the heel. "The pain is often worse with the first steps in the morning or after periods of rest. After standing for a while, the pain becomes more like a dull ache," explained Dr. Kerry Zang, podiatric medical director of the Arizona Institute of Footcare Physicians.

Fortunately, heel pain is a problem with many treatment options. "Conservative care relieves the pain for most people," said Dr. Zang, "and is always the first step in treating heel pain."

These treatments involve anti-inflammatory medication, injections, physical therapy or stretching exercises, night splints and custom orthotics. Patients usually respond to this course of treatment within three to six months, and it can be very successful.

In cases where these measures do not resolve the pain, surgery would be the next option – until recently. "Heel pain surgery has come a long way in the past 10 years, and my patients have been responding well to minimally invasive surgery for plantar fasciitis," said Zang. However, he is very excited about the results from a relatively new high-energy shockwave treatment for heel pain. "It is not very often that a new, non-invasive treatment becomes available with the potential to resolve a painful, debilitating and very common foot problem," said Zang. "Extracorporeal Shockwave Therapy (ESWT) is an exciting treatment option to utilize before surgery, with a success rate of 80 to 85 percent."

A special device generates shockwaves that are focused onto the problem area. "The treatment triggers the patient's body to repair itself," said Zang. The concept behind this therapy is for the shockwaves to stimulate the development of new blood vessels so that the healing process can be initiated. Zang explained, "It actually causes a controlled trauma to the heel, and blood goes to the area to help it get better."

In addition to stimulating the body's own healing mechanism, there are many other benefits of ESWT. "A big advantage is the procedure can now be accomplished in the office," said Zang. With the new equipment available, it is not necessary to go to a surgery center or hospital. The recovery period is shorter, there are fewer side effects and the risk is minimal because it is non-invasive.

The risks associated with surgery and general anesthesia are also eliminated. The treatment takes about 20 minutes, and patients go home in regular shoes. They can return to modified activities immediately and can progress to full activities in a much shorter time than with any of the invasive procedures. Zang says that patients occasionally report some minor pain or discomfort after the treatment. There might be some bruising or swelling in the area, but if it does occur, it usually resolves in a few days. Most people show significant improvement in six to 12 weeks, with many reporting pain relief right after the treatment. When healing is complete, patients can usually return to all activities without restriction.

"ESWT is a wonderful addition to heel pain treatment, as it preserves the integrity of the plantar fascia," said Zang. "This modality provides one more effective level of treatment, hopefully avoiding the need for invasive surgery in the future." He is excited to have this new technology available in his office. "It gives us a little better than 80 percent chance of resolving a painful, life altering condition in a non-invasive manner," he said. "And if it is not successful, we have not burned any bridges, there are still options remaining."

Heel pain can be very debilitating and should be addressed when it interferes with your lifestyle. The earlier these problems are diagnosed and treated, the higher the success rate for conservative measures.

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if you don't have to!

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