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Heel Pain

Every mile you walk puts 60 tons of stress on each foot. Your feet can handle a heavy load, but too much stress pushes them over their limits. When you pound your feet on hard surfaces playing sports or wear shoes that irritate sensitive tissues, you may develop heel pain, the most common problem affecting the foot and ankle. A sore heel will usually get better on its own without surgery if you give it enough rest. However, many people try to ignore the early signs of heel pain and keep on doing the activities that caused it. When you continue to use a sore heel, it will only get worse and could become a chronic condition leading to more problems. Surgery is rarely necessary.

Diagnosis

Heel pain can have many causes. If your heel hurts, see your doctor right away to determine why and get treatment. Tell him or her exactly where you have pain and how long you've had it. Your doctor will examine your heel, looking and feeling for signs of tenderness and swelling. You may be asked to walk, stand on one foot or do other physical tests that help your doctor pinpoint the cause of your sore heel.

[Top of page](#)

Treatment

Conditions that cause heel pain generally fall into two main categories: pain beneath the heel and pain behind the heel.

Pain Beneath the Heel

If it hurts under your heel, you may have one or more conditions that inflame the tissues on the bottom of your foot:

- **Stone bruise.** When you step on a hard object such as a rock or stone, you can bruise the fat pad on the underside of your heel. It may or may not look discolored. The pain goes away gradually with rest.
- **Plantar fasciitis (subcalcaneal pain).** Doing too much running or jumping can inflame the tissue band (fascia) connecting the heel bone to the base of the toes. The pain is centered under your heel and may be mild at first but flares up when you take your first steps after resting overnight. You may need to do special exercises, take medication to reduce swelling and wear a heel pad in your shoe.
- **Heel spur.** When plantar fasciitis continues for a long time, a heel spur (calcium deposit) may form where the fascia tissue band connects to your heel bone. Your doctor may take an X-ray to see the bony protrusion, which can vary in size. Treatment is usually the same as for plantar fasciitis: rest until the pain subsides, do special stretching exercises and wear heel pad shoe inserts.

Pain Behind the Heel

If you have pain behind your heel, you may have inflamed the area where the Achilles tendon inserts into the heel bone (retrocalcaneal bursitis). People often get this by running too much or wearing shoes that rub or cut into the back of the heel. Pain behind the heel may build slowly over time, causing the skin to thicken, get red and swell. You might develop a bump on the back of your heel that feels tender and warm to the touch. The pain flares up when you first start an activity after resting. It often hurts too much to wear normal shoes. You may need an X-ray to see if you also have a bone spur.

Treatment includes resting from the activities that caused the problem, doing certain stretching exercises, using pain medication and wearing open back shoes.

- Your doctor may want you to use a 3/8" or 1/2" heel insert.
- Stretch your Achilles tendon by leaning forward against a wall with your foot flat on the floor and heel elevated with the insert.
- Use nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory medications for pain and swelling.
- Consider placing ice on the back of the heel to reduce inflammation.

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- Foot & Ankle
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- Tumors
- Sports Injuries & Prevention
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[Top of page](#)

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