

# Working Feet

A practical guide to looking after your feet at work



[www.feetforlife.org](http://www.feetforlife.org)



The Society of  
Chiropodists and  
Podiatrists



# Your feet bear the brunt of your daily working life

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# Feet at work

Not only do feet face the hazards of high heels, steel toe-caps or ill fitting footwear, but also get to work in occupations and environments that can really put them at risk when the right advice isn't followed.

The average person walks the equivalent of five times around the earth in a lifetime, and in simple walking, each step can exert up to two times your body weight in ground reaction force through your lower limb; so a trim 10 stone person will have between 15 and 20 stone of impact going through the heel on heel-strike. Considering the distance covered, and the hazards feet are exposed to during a working lifetime, it is no wonder that working feet need care and attention if they are going to survive.

Your feet bear the brunt of your daily working life. Prolonged standing, walking, operating machinery, high heels, falling objects and slippery surfaces are just some of the dangers we expose our feet to in the workplace.

Every year, 2 million sick days are lost due to lower limb disorders, and many of these sick days could be prevented by simply:

- wearing the right shoe for the job;
- following an appropriate daily foot care routine.

ELAINE worked in a supermarket in the fresh fruit and vegetable display area. Some grapes had fallen out of the packaging and were loose on the floor. Elaine slipped and fell, spraining her ankle, which resulted in her having two weeks off work. If she had worn safety footwear with a slip resistant sole, this accident may have been prevented.

CAROLE normally worked in an office of a company, but was asked to participate in an exhibition at the NEC for a week promoting the company. She continued to wear her usual high heel court shoe, but by the end of the week she was experiencing severe pain in the ball of her right foot. After a visit to her local hospital and an x-ray, she was diagnosed with a stress fracture of a metatarsal bone in the foot.



# Foot pain

In the UK, it is thought that 75 to 80 per cent of the adult population has some form of foot problem, and over 90 per cent will suffer from a foot problem at some point in their lives. Many people put up with foot pain believing it to be normal.

We have all heard the excuses... “I’m breaking the shoes in”, “I’m on them all day, what do you expect,” to name but a few. However, persistent pain should not be an every day occurrence, and is the body’s warning system that something is wrong. Don’t ignore it.

The environment in which we work can also impact on foot comfort, such as the type of floor we stand on. Wooden floors, for example, tend to have some ‘give’, which is much more forgiving than tiled, concrete or marble floors that have very little or no ‘give’ at all. It is not unusual for problems to arise within the foot, lower leg and back as a result of working on hard unyielding surfaces for long periods – especially if you are also wearing a hard soled shoe with no shock absorption.

## Dangers for working feet

Working feet can be exposed to many dangers. To avoid painful conditions, you need to follow footwear and foot care advice that is suited to your needs. Pain and discomfort ultimately affect how well you perform in terms of work and play; affecting mobility and performance, and may prevent you from walking, playing sport, and leading a normal, active life. Not protecting feet at work may also lead to serious injury and loss of livelihood.



## Work related foot problems

We all know that regular maintenance and a yearly MOT is vital to keep a car running smoothly, yet most of us overlook how important it is to care for our feet. Hidden away in shoes, we don’t give them much thought.

Standing for long periods may cause pain or discomfort to the feet, ankles, knees and hips, as well as to the back and neck. Also, standing for long periods in unsuitable footwear may exacerbate any underlying problem you may have with your joints, increasing the rate at which arthritic changes take place.

## Accidents at work

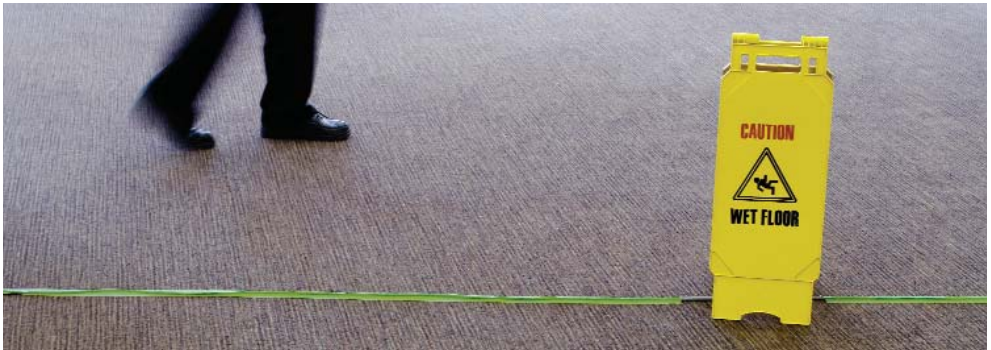
In an at-risk environment, unprotected feet are at risk from accident and injury such as puncture wounds, crushing and laceration, sprained ankles, chemical burns, fractures and even amputations.

# Common problems

Your occupation can contribute to foot problems, and working feet are particularly prone to the following problems:

- Aches or pains in the heel, arch, ball of the foot or legs.
- Itching and/or discolouration in the legs caused by varicose veins.
- Numbness, tingling in the foot, changes to the colour of the skin, caused by poor circulation.
- Swelling in the feet, ankle or leg.
- Injuries such as crushing, punctures, amputations and lacerations caused by heavy objects falling and crushing the foot or toes; treading on pointed or sharp objects such as nails or broken glass; feet trapped between objects, such as between a conveyor belt and roller.
- Sprained ankles, fractures or broken bones resulting from slips, trips and falls. Causes include slippery floors, long stride length with the wrong heel, cluttered walkways, incorrect footwear and poor lighting.
- Constant walking on hard, inflexible surfaces can exacerbate joint damage, and wearing shoes that are a poor fit, or have too high a heel.
- Knee, hip, back and neck pain.
- Corns and hard skin.
- Sweaty and smelly feet.
- Athlete's foot.

Members of the Society of Chiropractors and Podiatrists are experts in footcare. To find a podiatrist\* near you, see page 15.



\* The terms podiatrist and chiropractor are interchangeable.



# Protect your feet at work

The good news is that it's never too late to start looking after your feet, and there is a lot you can do to help yourself.



## Tips for working feet

- Wear shoes that are appropriate for your job and suitable for your work conditions.
  - Different occupations have different footwear requirements. Caterers and nurses, for example, may simply need a good-fitting, supportive shoe with an enclosed toe for protection, but a builder will require safety footwear with a steel toecap.
- Wear safety footwear if the job requires or recommends it.
- Wear shoes that fit properly, allowing your toes wiggle room (about 1cm gap between longest toe and end of shoe). This also applies to footwear with steel toecaps – toes are vulnerable if they're being squashed against steel!
- For women who want to wear heels, stick to a heel height of around 4cm for everyday footwear, and do daily calf stretching exercises to keep calf and heel muscles supple. If you're on your feet constantly, reduce heel height to 2cm.
- Vary heel height from day to day.
- Wear shoes with a strap or lace over the instep rather than slip-ons. This will stop your foot sliding forward, a bit like a seatbelt does in a car.
- Always have two pairs of shoes on the go, alternating on a daily basis so that sweat can dry out properly. Damp shoes each morning are the perfect environments for athlete's foot and the bacteria that causes smelly feet.
- Safety footwear such as protective toecaps can prevent toes being crushed. They're not all ugly; some high profile brands now make good-looking safety boots.
- Where slips can occur – wear slip resistant soles.
- If there is a danger from nails or sharp objects – wear puncture resistant soles.
- Adopt a regular foot care regime to keep your feet in tip-top condition.



### Tips for healthy feet

- To keep your feet fit and flexible and exercise them:
  - circle your feet 10 times in each direction, keeping your leg as still as possible.
  - Try circling the alphabet with your feet.
  - Pick up pencils or marbles and put them down next to your other foot – ready to do the same thing again with that one.
- At home, walk about bare-footed on safe flooring to exercise them. (Please do a foot check afterwards if you have diabetes, or another systemic condition that may affect healing).
- If standing all day, try to move about or flex the feet up and down to help move the circulation. Once at home, elevate the feet and legs above the head and heart for 15 minutes or so.

### Don't ignore foot pain

Resolve foot problems by seeking specialist help from a podiatrist\*. See a member of the Society of Chiropodists and Podiatrists who can help to keep your feet comfortable and functioning well. The podiatrist can advise and treat foot problems that may affect your well-being at work, and also advise on footwear style and fit. [See pages 14-15 for more information.]

Visit The Society of Chiropodists and Podiatrists' website at [www.feetforlife.org](http://www.feetforlife.org) or telephone 0845 450 3720 to find your nearest podiatrist.

\* The terms podiatrist and chiropodist are interchangeable.

# The right shoe for the job



## Shoe fit

Regardless of your workplace: warehouse, airport, shop, office or even at home – comfortable, properly fitted footwear is essential to maintaining good foot health. Many minor foot ailments can be relieved with properly fitted and carefully selected shoes. In many workplaces, safety shoes are necessary to protect against environmental risks, but they also need to be comfortable and correctly fitted. There is a misconception that safety shoes, especially protective toecaps, will be uncomfortable, but if the shoes are padded and fitted correctly, you should not be able to feel the toecaps at all. Women should take note that court shoe style steel toecaps are difficult to fit accurately.

## Footwear

If you are on your feet at work, you should wear the right shoe for the job, choosing footwear that is appropriate for your occupation, working environment and feet.

Following a risk assessment, safety footwear may be required or recommended. If it is required or recommended, make sure you wear it. If safety footwear is not worn when required, you may receive no compensation for injury.

Also, any footwear that doesn't fit properly can cause life-long foot problems. Problems could be easily avoided or reduced by following the right advice.







### Tips on getting the right fit

- Always have both feet measured because they may not be the same size. When choosing shoes, the length, width and depth of the shoes are important.
- Always try on both shoes.
- Ensure there is enough room at the front of the shoes to allow for the natural movement of your toes when walking – your toes should be able to wiggle.
- Make sure there is around 1cm space between your longest toe and the end of the shoe.
- When choosing new shoes, take time to test them out, walk around to ensure maximum comfort.
- Don't break in new shoes. Shoes that fit well should feel comfortable.
- As you get older, your feet tend to get larger, so get them measured periodically.
- Good fit doesn't necessarily mean expensive.



Photograph: ARCO

# Choosing the best safety shoes

## What to look for

- Upper – made from natural materials such as leather or a breathable man-made fabric. Some leather has a plastic coating to repel water and allow the shoe to be wiped clean.
- Lining – breathable material keeps the foot fresh; they need to be smooth and seam-free.
- Toe area – should be foot-shaped and deep enough to prevent rubbing and allow the toes to wiggle. This is especially important with protective toecaps. If the shoes are padded and fitted properly, you should not be able to feel the toecaps at all.
- Insole – preferably removable to allow easy insertion of padding or orthoses.
- Heel fit – the heel should fit snugly on the foot, stopping the heel slipping out of the shoe and stabilising the foot upon ground contact.
- Heel – should have a broad base, no higher than 4cm. If worn for long stretches, should be no more than 2cm in height.
- Sole – Should be strong and flexible with shock absorption to cushion the jolts of walking on hard surfaces. Material should be slip resistant, such as rubber, polyurethane or PVC.
- Fastenings – laces, buckles or Velcro help to secure the foot in the shoe.



Photographs: ARCO



# Health and safety legislation

The Health and Safety Executive has a campaign running until 2010 to reduce slips, trips and falls by 30 per cent. As well as creating a safe environment by house-keeping and good building design, a focal point of the campaign is workers and their footwear.

Health and Safety legislation includes footwear in the workplace. The basic legislative requirement is that all reasonable efforts must be made to eliminate or reduce the likelihood of injury occurring in the first place. An employer may need to issue safety or protective footwear to reduce the severity of an injury.

Risk assessments are used to decide whether an employee needs special footwear for work.





## Employer and employee's duties

Health and Safety legislation includes workplace footwear:

### **Health and Safety at Work Act 1974**

The general duty:

- section 2 outlines the need of the employer to provide a safe working environment
- section 7 outlines the general duties of employees at work to take reasonable care of his own health and safety and co-operate with his employer to enable him to discharge his legal duties.

### **The Personal Protective Equipment at Work Regulations 1992 (as amended)**

Personal Protective Equipment (including special workplace footwear) must be:

- provided where risks have been identified and cannot be controlled in any other way;
- properly assessed before use to ensure it is suitable;
- maintained and stored properly;
- provided with instructions on how to use it safely;
- used correctly by employees.

### **The Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999**

This requires that:

- a 'suitable and sufficient' assessment of the risk to the health and safety of persons at work and of those not in his employment be made.
- a hierarchy of risks is set out.

# Podiatry

## What is a podiatrist?

Podiatrists (the name chiropodist is familiar to many, and means the same as podiatrist) are highly skilled professionals trained to prevent, diagnose, treat and rehabilitate abnormal conditions of the feet and lower limbs. They prevent and correct deformity, keep people mobile and active, relieve pain and treat infections. General treatments include skin, such as corn and callus removal, nail-care, soft tissue and connective tissue problems, and advice on footwear. Podiatrists carry out specialised work such as nail surgery and musculoskeletal assessments. They can also diagnose and treat conditions that threaten the feet of patients liable to injury or pressure related problems, as a result of medical disorders such as diabetes, rheumatoid arthritis or impaired circulation.



## Podiatric surgery

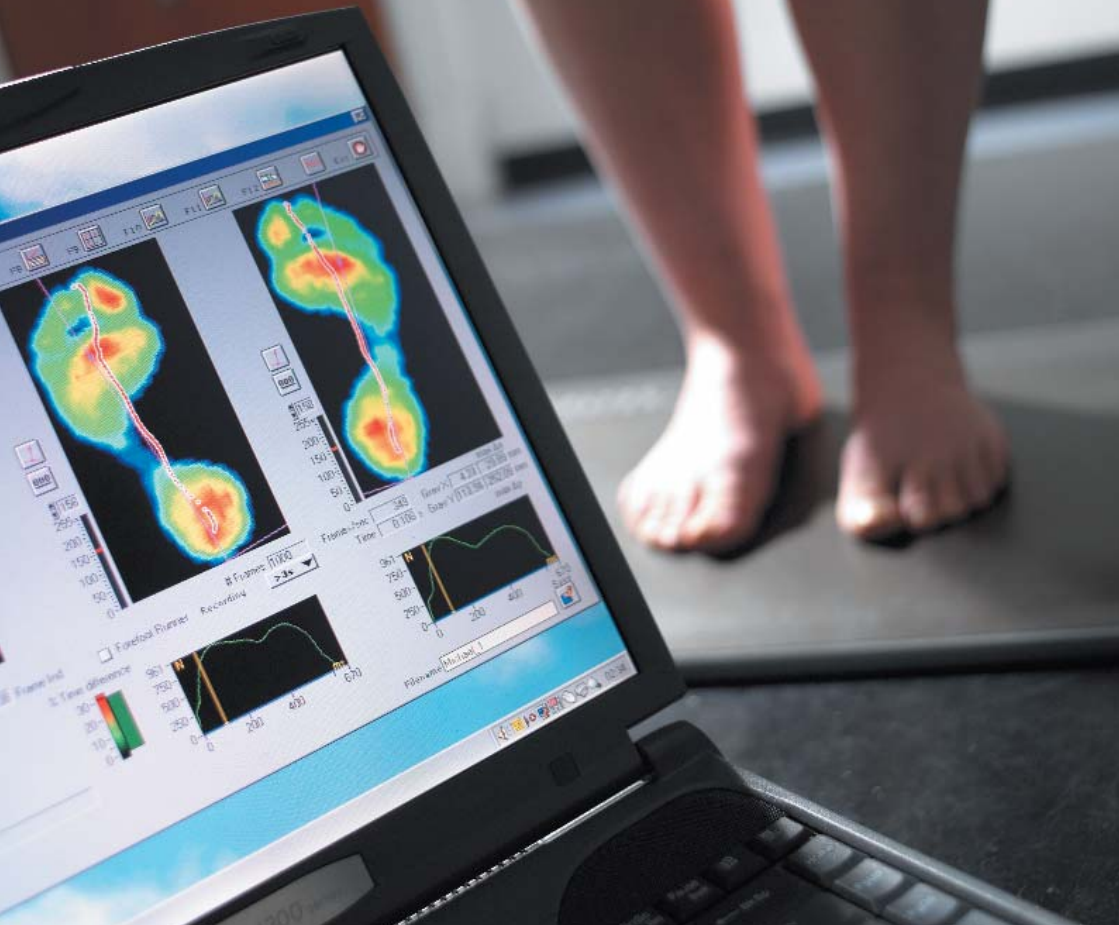
Some podiatrists known as podiatric surgeons specialise in surgery to the foot and ankle, performing surgery to manage conditions such as bunions, hammer toes, removal of neuromas, to name but a few procedures they carry out.

## Biomechanics

Some podiatrists specialise in biomechanics – looking at the relationship between the bones, muscles and soft tissue in the foot and lower limb, and its effects on other parts of the body such as the back and knee.

## How to find a podiatrist

To find a local podiatrist, you can either approach your GP practice for information on NHS referral, or, for a private consultation, you can visit [www.feetforlife.org](http://www.feetforlife.org) or telephone 0845 450 3720.



## Health Professions Council

Since July 2005, only those who have satisfied the criteria for registration with the HPC can call themselves a chiropodist or podiatrist. The HPC is a UK-wide regulatory body, which regulates 13 health professions. All members of the Society of Chiropodists and Podiatrists are members of the HPC.

Some letters to look out for after the name of the chiropodist or podiatrist are:

### HPC Registered

**MChS/FChS** – Member/Fellow of the Society of Chiropodists and Podiatrists

Other qualifications they may display are:

**DPodM** – Diploma in Podiatric Medicine

**FCPodS** – Podiatric Surgeon

**BSc/BSc (Hons)** – Bachelor of Science degree in Podiatric Medicine

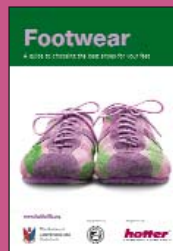
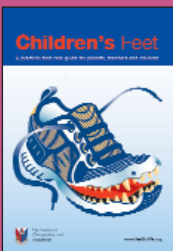
A word of caution, only the titles chiropodist and podiatrist are protected in law. There are some people who call themselves other foot-related titles, who are unregulated by the HPC. Attending an HPC registered chiropodist or podiatrist helps ensure safety and proficiency.



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## Further foot health information

The Society of Chiropodists and Podiatrists provides a number of foot health information leaflets for you to either download in PDF form from the Society's website, [www.feetforlife.org](http://www.feetforlife.org), or to send for in hard copy from the address at the bottom of the page. Current leaflets include *Children's Feet*, *Sporty Feet*, *Heel Pain*, *Footwear* and *Footcare for People with Diabetes*. More will be published soon.



You may find more information from:

[www.feetforlife.org](http://www.feetforlife.org)

[www.hpc-uk.org](http://www.hpc-uk.org)

[www.hse.gov.uk](http://www.hse.gov.uk)

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