

A dozen years ago, my heels hurt every time I got out of bed, when I stood up from my work desk to walk down the hall, and when I would begin a run. Every. Single. Time. The pain wouldn't stop until I had warmed up whatever little ligaments and tiny tendons were in severe anguish. Then, for the duration of the run, the heel pain would subside. But it never went completely away.

The pain temporarily dissipating cause me to surmise this would never go away. I'd never had this injury and didn't know it had a name. So, I did some digging on the smart phone. Surely I was not the first runner to have this malady. (This pain was not just a malady and don't call me Shirley.)

The Google tells us the plantar fascia is a tissue that looks like a series of fat rubber bands and extends from the heel toward the toes, along the arch of the foot. It's made of collagen, a rigid protein that's not very stretchy. The stress of overuse, overpronation, or overused shoes can rip tiny tears in the plantar fascia tissue, causing heel pain and inflammation—that's plantar fasciitis. (Runner's World, 9/22/2022)

The same article claims a runner's plantar fasciitis is caused by suddenly increasing mileage, specific foot structures, and the wrong running shoes. All of these causes can overload the plantar fascia—the connective tissue that runs from your heel to the base of your toes—resulting in heel pain. Don't overtrain (subjective at best), neglect to stretch the calf muscles (if you have those), or overdo hill workouts (not a surprise) and speed intervals (don't we all want to be faster?).

All I knew was that both heels hurt, a lot and always. The only exception was around one to two miles into a run; then there would be a dull ache that I would ignore. The pain came roaring back when the heels "cooled" down. I learned about using a golf ball, rolling it under the heel. I learned about gently stretching the Achillies. I learned about stretching the plantar itself by gently grasping and pulling the toes towards the knee. Those each helped alleviate the pain, but the plantar fascia dragged on. And on.

And then, one day while idling time away, with the ever-present throbbing going on in my heels as I sat at a work meeting, I was just about 10 months into my personal problem at that point. I found several comments by actual runners that no matter what exercises you added to your routine, or how much time you took away from

running, the plantar fasciitis would heal itself within 12-13 months. Now I had an end date. I had hope.

I also had a rotation of running shoes, very old and worn down running shoes. My hope led me into a running store in a town far away from my home, looking for a new running shoe supporting high arches, narrow feet, tender heels, and light on the foot strike. I test drove a pair that I liked just outside the store, out on the asphalt parking lot and back, more than a few times. The heel pain . . . disappeared. Gone. Vanished. I tried to recreate the painful heels. Couldn't do it. I bought the shoes.

Whether the plantar fasciitis disappeared because of new shoes, the length of time for the injury to heal, or all the exercising, I will never know. But for a very long time in runner's miles, I wore every iteration of that shoe. The injury became a memory only realized when I have moments of plantar fascia ache, caused by overwearing slippers with no heel support or unlaced shoes with too low a drop.

I'm now closing in on retirement age, whenever that occurs. I still run six days a week, albeit more slowly, much to my chagrin. I am also rickety in my gait, whether I'm walking or running. Weak ankles, each being compromised from separate falling incidents, snapping each ankle back in identical manners. Weak glutes from sheer neglect, and weak hips from even more neglect. The frontal lobotomy is next.

Physical therapy is a wonderful thing to cure what ails you, or me, when the Saturday Night Fever strut is out of the question. And the exercises are so simple and painless, as long as you actually carry out the exercises:

Balance on one ankle: I could not hold that pose for more than five seconds. I kid you not. Doing that balancing act on an almost daily basis has led to holding the pose for minutes at a time;

Swing a leg side to side in front of you in an ever-increasing arch, initially for 15 seconds and now for minutes at a time;

Drop down on a stair step, touching the step below with one leg, while one hand holds the rail, beginning with doing five for each foot, feeling the exercise in the hip muscles, first balls of feet only touching, then the entire foot, leading to 15-30 at a time;

Squat, either with a chair in front of you or rising from a chair, pushing up with your quad muscles and not your back, keeping your frame upright and not bent over,

starting with one repeat, leading to five, then 10, then 20. That will get your posterior's attention.

We'll save the advanced exercises and the different colored bands for a later time. The idea is to be ambulatory without fear of breaking something. I'm not looking to be the champion PT patient. My next goal is to walk down the stairs while keeping both legs moving forward and not sideways. Small victories are good.

Because of the compromised ankles, my running gait had become a desperate series of small lunges to maintain any pace, fast or slow. The most obvious result of that running style was my lateral heel whip from my left forefoot striking my right shoe with almost every stride, over and over and over. Did I mention the consistent repetition of that result with every stride? Just checking.

Every single pair of running shoes that I owned, now own, and have used show the pattern of poor gait: the flattening of the left shoe's forefoot midsole from striking the right shoe. Each left shoe has the appearance that a knife was taken to the side closest to the right shoe and carved flat. On one pair, the left shoe appears to have only a portion of the shoe. Not a pretty image.

And while I've improved my running form, now supported by stronger ankles and firmer glutes, I still do more than my share of flopping around. Just a wee bit. Were I approaching you on a run, you would see me unable to run a straight line longer than four or five steps. You may not notice, unless I actually run into your space, but I notice. The cause for this is simple enough: today's style of running shoes have more than their share of midsole material. Gone are the running shoes with a midsole that is seemingly just an afterthought. The shoes are lighter, quicker, more forgiving. But they are taller and without the lateral support an older runner needs. It took me months to figure that out and longer to find the shoes to save my stride from being shared up close and personal with others.

I run tall. I run on my forefoot or what we call the balls of my feet. I touch the ground lightly, always on the same spot on the outside of the sole of my shoes. The heels only feel the running surface when I'm running downhill. I need a heel drop of at least eight millimeters to avoid a plantar fasciitis recurrence and enough cushion in the forefoot that I am not feeling the pebbles I strike when I touch the ground.

Too much midfoot cushion and I'm moving more laterally than I am in a forwards direction, sliding enough side to side as to cause great angst and frustration within me. Not enough cushion and I'm wincing with every foot strike, becoming a very unhappy camper. While I don't have OCD as did Goldilocks (which I find hysterically humorous that someone would go to great lengths to explain), I do need the running shoe proper to my gait and needs. Don't we all.

I race in the shoes with the carbon plate and the ZoomX foam. High in stack height, light in weight, responsive to the turnover. Funny thing: even before I began PT and before the strengthening in stride evolved, I didn't flop around in that shoe, no matter the version being worn when I ran. An idea came into my head and wouldn't go away. I required a shoe with midsole support, firm in foot strike, soft in recovery, light in weight.

With assistance from shoe retailers allowing me to purchase a pair of running shoes, to be returned if that particular pair didn't meet expectations (or for any other reason, frankly), I began a months-long search. Back to Goldilocks and her need to break into homes, the first shoes I tried were too soft, causing me to bounce sideways because my hips aren't yet sufficiently strong to power me forward in such shoes. The next few pairs were firm but failed to give me that feather-touch feeling when landing from one stride and pushing off to the next. How hard is it to find a stack height of at least 8 mm with sufficient cushioning, light in weight, and formed for feeling fast when running?

Turns out, not that hard. Welcome to the New Balance Fuelcell Rebel v3. One review from another runner offered that they had put 400-477 miles on a pair and the shoe was their every day running shoe. That would be for distance, tempo, track, easy, and hilly runs. Purchasing a pair, that being the least expensive with the most garish color, I went out for a spin on a hill workout. Then I wore them for an easy run followed by a tempo run, followed by a weekend distance run. I bought a second pair. After two weeks and almost 70 miles in the initial pair, these are keepers because they have the correct stack height, weight, response, and cushion. But most importantly, I run a straight line in them. So much so that I don't think about keeping a straight running line while running.

Ask for them by name.