

## Your Feet Carry You Through Life – Are You Taking Care of Them?

As an orthotist, I see firsthand how often people ignore foot pain or adapt to discomfort without realising the long-term consequences. But here's the truth: foot health is foundational to your overall well-being.

Each foot contains 26 bones, 33 joints, and over 100 muscles, tendons, and ligaments. They serve as the foundation for your entire body – supporting your weight, absorbing impact, and influencing the alignment of your knees, hips, and back. When something's not quite right in your feet, it can affect everything above them.

The most common foot problems I see in clinic include plantar fasciitis (that sharp heel pain in the morning), flat feet, ankle instability, and diabetes-related foot issues. These can have a huge impact on your quality of life. Activities you once enjoyed – like walking the dog, going out for a stroll with a friend, or even just getting out of bed or going to make a cuppa – can become uncomfortable or even painful.

The good news? These issues are often manageable with the right intervention. Seeing an orthotist can help you get to the root of the problem and support you in getting back on your feet. In orthotics services, we specialise in assessing how you walk (your gait), looking at the structure of your feet, and understanding how this affects your movement. After a thorough examination, we design orthoses tailored to you – aiming to improve alignment, ease pain, and help you move more comfortably.

## Why Foot Health Is About More Than Just Comfort

It's not just about comfort – foot health can be a marker of your overall health. A key study published in *JAMA* found that gait speed (how fast you walk) is strongly linked to life expectancy in older adults. Simply put, people who walked faster tended to live longer. It's a powerful reminder that mobility is about much more than just getting around – it's tied to your health and independence as you age.

## Simple Steps to Look After Your Feet

As an orthotist, I always recommend taking care of your feet *before* problems arise:

- **Choose supportive, well-fitting footwear** – Don't be swayed by trends or big-name brands. Get advice on what type of shoe best supports your feet and lifestyle.
- **Strengthen and stretch your feet and legs regularly** – As long as you don't have an underlying condition like neuropathy, kick your shoes off and explore walking barefoot on grass, sand or other natural surfaces. Grip with your toes, pick things up, play air piano – just keep those feet moving!
- **Don't ignore ongoing discomfort** – Persistent foot pain is a sign that something's wrong. Today's foot problem could turn into tomorrow's knee, hip or back problem if left untreated.

Your feet work hard for you every single day. Show them some care and attention now, and they'll carry you well into the future.

*Written by Kristina Valaitiene, Specialist Orthotist, South Tees Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust*