

THEY HOLD US up all day long, they get us everywhere we need to go, and they connect our bodies to the earth. Some yoga teachers even call the feet the “roots” of the body.

Yet for all that our feet do for us, we don't do much for them in return. We cram them into tight shoes, pound along on them all day, and generally ignore them unless they're giving us serious trouble. The result is that at some point in their lives 7 of 10 people will suffer from foot problems, many of which are entirely preventable.

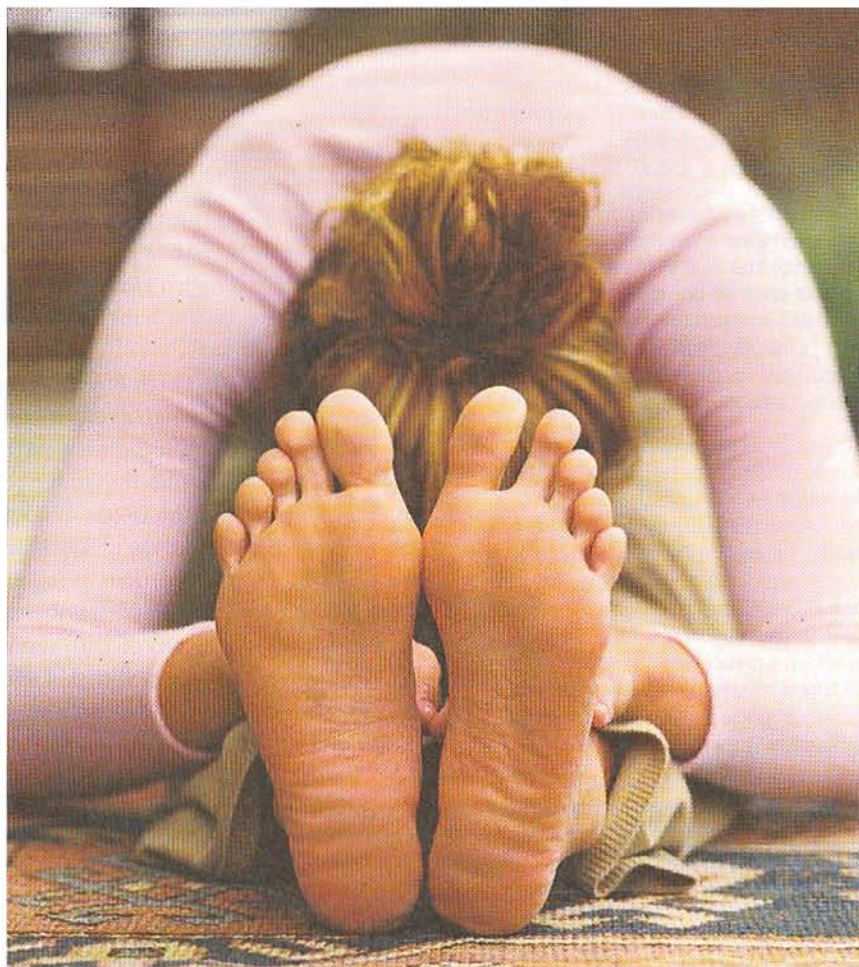
Robert Kornfeld, a holistic podiatrist in New York City, says he's seen it all: people hobbling in with knobby, inflamed bunions and hammer toes, the dull throb of tendinitis, the achy soles of plantar fasciitis.

Those aren't just niggling minor ailments; some foot problems can alter the foot's structure and trigger pain elsewhere in the body. “I

sing that song to my patients,” Kornfeld says: “The foot bone's connected to the leg bone ...” In fact, experts say one of the most important reasons to treat foot problems early is to prevent them from throwing the knees, hips, back, and shoulders out of whack.

And one of the best ways to take care of your feet is with yoga. “I recommend that all my patients start yoga immediately,” Kornfeld says. “When you treat foot problems with yoga, you end up treating back pain, hip pain, all kinds of structural problems. Not only does it stretch out the muscles and lead to a greater range of motion, but it helps heal the root issue of inflammation as well.”

In fact, yoga gives feet a healthy workout that they rarely get any other way. “You couldn't ask for a better set of tools to reawaken



Happy Feet

Give your feet just a little attention,
and your whole body will feel better.

the feet,” says yoga teacher Rodney Yee, of the Piedmont Yoga Studio in Oakland, California. Below, some tips from the experts on how best to use yoga to prevent or treat foot pain.

THROW YOUR WEIGHT AROUND

The first place to begin building awareness of your feet is in standing poses such as Tadasana (Mountain Pose). Before you start the pose, think about how you naturally stand, suggests Janice Gates, a specialist in therapeutic yoga and the founding director of the Yoga Garden Studio in

feet, glorious feet

Strengthening your feet is all well and good, but what about pure pleasure?

An at-home foot spa can be the ultimate in relaxation. My daughters (aged 13 and 10) and I have turned it into a Friday-night ritual: We make popcorn, spread some towels on the floor, and we're set.

Start by filling a basin with hot water, Epsom salts, and a few drops of peppermint or tea tree oil to increase the tingle factor. (If you have one of those vibrating foot baths, so much the better.) Soak for at least 15 minutes, then exfoliate with a foot scrub or pumice stone, giving particular care to the heels and other callused areas.

The last step is to moisturize, using the richest, thickest moisturizer you can find. My daughters and I massage each other's feet, paying particular attention to the reflexology points on the balls of the foot. (We use a chart we found online; try <http://images.google.com/>, searching on "foot reflexology chart.") If the skin on your feet is particularly dry, slather on a thick layer of cream just before bed and put on cotton socks. Your feet will be soft and supple by morning. M.H.

San Anselmo, California. Do you tend to put your weight on the inner edge of your foot, which tends to make your legs bow inward, or on the outer edge, which tends to make the knees bow out? (If you can't tell, check the bottoms of your shoes—you can often tell from the way the soles are wearing.)

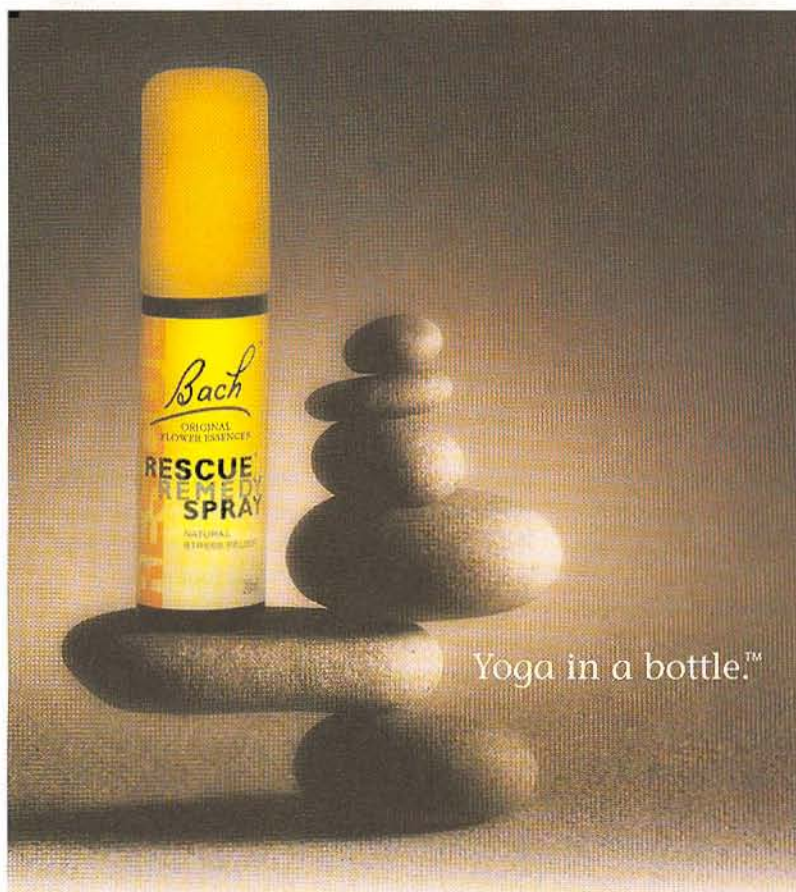
Notice how your weight falls, and then play with it by rocking forward and back, lifting first your toes, then your heels. If you tend to stand perched a little forward, try shifting your weight back a bit, and vice versa.

Next, try lifting the arch of your foot while pushing down around the edges, creating both a sense of rooting into the earth and lifting energy up from the center, to form the Mula Bandha (Root Lock). "Sometimes I use the image of a jack-in-the-box: collapsing down, then springing up," says Gates. "You're pushing down to lift up." Once you start to do this, you'll find yourself more aware of your feet and distributing your weight better in your everyday life.

WORK THOSE TOES

One great way to limber up stiff, under-used feet is to work on the articulation of the toes, which in most of us have lost at least some of their range of motion, says Tias Little, director of YogaSource in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Little considers the feet so important he not only focuses on them in his regular sessions, but has also created a separate class he calls Feet as Foundation. "Think of the way babies spread their toes and crawl by pushing off with them," he says. "We need to regain that." Little guides students through a routine in which they try to move each toe separately from the others and practice picking things up with their toes.

In standing poses, focus on elongating the toes to stretch the sole of your foot. Press down into your heels at the same time you press forward with the base of the big and little toes, grounding forward with the ball of the foot. "Think of it as stretching the sole of the foot like a drum," Little says. This can improve circulation,



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on the sole of the foot, which, when contracted, can become inflamed, leading to plantar fasciitis.

Little also teaches students to go back and forth between Vajrasana (Thunderbolt Pose) and what he calls "broken toe pose." From Vajrasana, lift your hips, curl your toes under and lift your heels, and then lean back so your weight rests on the "necks" (not the pads) of your toes.

Adho Mukha Svanasana (Downward-Facing Dog) is another way to give the feet a good stretch; Gates teaches her students to lift the arches of the feet as high as possible, then extend the heels toward the floor to work the plantar fascia. "At first it feels impossible when you try to lower your heels, but it just takes practice. And it feels so good when you do," she says.

Make these exercises part of your life, and your foot bones (not to mention your leg bones, hip bones, and maybe even your head bone) will be forever grateful. ■

Melanie Haiken is a freelance writer in San Rafael, California.

spa supplies

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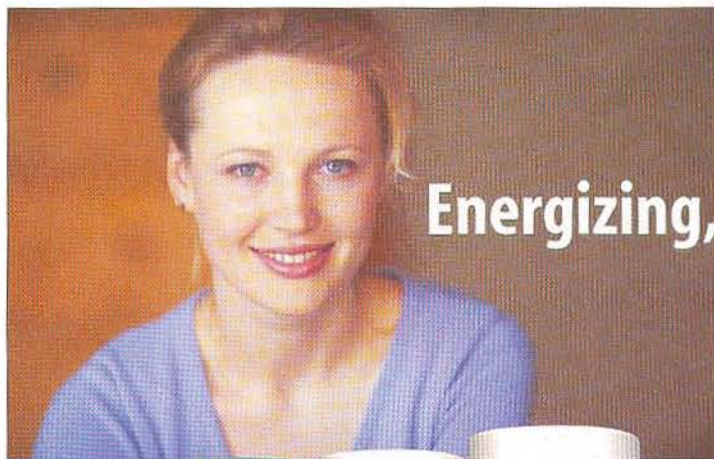
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