

HEALTH

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TCM: Sole survivors

Plantar fasciitis is a common condition, involving inflammation of the fascia (fibrous connective tissue) that runs underneath the heel to the toes. The characteristic sign for this is being unable to straighten the foot after getting out of bed in the morning or after long periods of sitting down – this pain relates to the contraction of the fascia. It tends to occur in those who are obese, have high arches/flat feet or who walk continually on hard surfaces. Pain usually eases on walking.

According to traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), the sole and heel are nourished and promoted by the kidney meridians. The kidney meridian starts below the small toe, runs across the middle of the sole and the arch of the foot, and then circles behind the inner ankle and travels along the inner side of leg to the trunk.

Essence stored in the kidney system is transformed into bone marrow, which provides the nutrients for the bones and tendons to grow and rebuild. The stored essence declines with ageing, which makes plantar fasciitis more common in middle-aged and elderly people as the arch of foot becomes weak.

TCM thus stresses invigorating the kidney to assist the recovery process of the foot. This part of the treatment is usually given with decoctions, which may include processed rehmannia rhizome, Chinese cypress bark, anemarrhena rhizome, cornus fruit and achyranthes root.

In plantar fasciitis, heel pain is usually due to irritation or inflammation of the involved tissues in the foot. However, TCM believes it means the foot has developed a sluggish meridian flow that can result from different pathological influences.

TCM physicians will differentiate between these underlying disharmonies according to the nature of the pain. For example, damp and cold influences will lead to pain accompanied by a cold and heavy sensation, and it can be eased by warmth and made worse in cold, rainy weather. On the other hand, a sharp pain that's worse at night is formed by blood stasis. Physicians will design a specific treatment plan to unblock the meridian, and may use hot compresses, herbal washing, acupuncture, bone-setting or massage.

In a typical massage therapy, physicians will first relieve tension in the fascia by using techniques such as pushing, pinching and tapping on the heel region. Then they will knead forcefully on selected acupoints so as to boost meridian flow in the foot. The third step is to rock the ankle backwards and forwards which helps to increase the range of joint motion and promotes flexibility. This treatment is followed by a specially prepared herbal compress or foot wash.

Self-care techniques also help reduce pain and promote healing. For example, in the morning before getting out of bed, stretch the calf muscles, sole

and heel tendon and gently flex the foot. This helps ease the tightness of the plantar fascia that occurs overnight.

Sufferers should also warm up before performing any activity, especially sport. Other protective measures include avoiding sudden and strenuous physical movements, wearing proper footwear, using a splint while sleeping, or taping the foot so the ankle and heel are supported.

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