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# THE GOOD LIFE

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## Prepare Your Feet for Summer

*By Dr. Kate Clayton-Jones,  
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Dr. Kate Clayton-Jones

Some people believe that sore feet are an inevitable condition of aging—that bent toes, thick nails, corns, and calluses can't be helped. I maintain that this isn't true. Regular, evidence-based foot care, gentle exercise, and scrupulous shoe selection can result in happy and healthy feet at any age.

As spring and summer bring outdoor activities, people who have been cooped up most of the winter long to get out. Some walk for pleasure, some hike in the woods, some march to raise funds for good causes, and some just want to change into shorts and strap on some sandals. A little caution and preparation are a good idea. Standing for hours or walking miles does not have to be painful on the feet. If someone is planning to stand or walk for a long stretch of time, my suggestion is that they spend a little time getting their feet prepared. It starts with trimming toenails about a week before an event so that the toe tips are not too tender. Doing some intrinsic muscle exercises to strengthen the feet—like ankle rotations and crunching and splaying toes—will also be beneficial. On the day of the event, feet ought to be protected, which can be done by rubbing them with a good moisturizer, like coconut oil (please no petroleum), and then putting on a pair of well-fitting, moisture-wicking socks. Merino wool or alpaca are excellent options because they do not hold moisture and they insulate both against heat and cold. No matter the event, shoes should be secured using a strap (or a tongue pad) so that the heel does not slip. Toes should never be curling to hold the shoes on—that causes pain and is a problem just waiting to happen. Remember: Healthy feet can carry us a long way.

Even if you are just wanting to change into shorts and sandals and take a gentle walk, don't forget that your feet have been encased in socks and sturdy shoes for months. Before you ask them to adjust to flip flops or sandals, the intrinsic muscles of the feet that have been dormant all winter need to be strengthened. Otherwise, you are at risk for painful plantar fasciitis, an inflammation of a fibrous band of tissue called the plantar fascia, that runs along the length of the foot. This condition can be caused by an increase in activity level, the surface upon which you are walking, and the type of shoe you are wearing. To prevent this debilitating condition, you can strengthen the muscles in your feet with the same exercises I mentioned above. They do not require any special equipment. A few weeks of curling and clenching your toes,

ankle spinning, heel lifts, and using your toes to pick up a towel from the floor will get your feet in shape for the months ahead. These movements also increase circulation. Spread your toes wide when you are done and appreciate how they feel, then rub a little coconut oil on winter-dry skin and think about the shoes you want to wear.

Certainly, flip flops are not for everyone and should not be considered if you have any problems with balance. For many people, they are uncomfortable and unsupportive. However, there are some lovely sandals that will allow you to welcome summer in style, and if fit properly, will offer both support and protection. To make sure a sandal fits your foot correctly, trace the outline of your foot on a piece of paper, cut it out, and then place it in the foot base of the shoe. If the heel aligns with the heel cup of the shoes and the widest part of your foot corresponds with the widest part of the shoe, you have a good fit. If the answer to those questions is no, you will be at risk for developing calluses and blisters.

The next thing to look at closely are the straps. When you put your foot into the shoes and step forward, does your heel lift off the shoe? If the answer is yes, your toes will end up curling to hold your shoes on, and that is not what they were designed to do. Your toes should be flat and widespread for balance. Relaxed toes flex and signal the brain to keep us upright. They are responsible for dozens of tiny adjustments that we never notice, and if they are curled tightly to hold on our shoes, this does not happen. When I see a new patient, I check the insoles of their shoes. Deep toe indentations signal shoes that do not fit right or are not fastened correctly.

Feet that function well in shoes that fit make amazing things happen. Balance is improved, contact with the earth (grounding) is enhanced, and daily activities become more enjoyable. A patient once told me that she loved to enjoy a day out with her mother, but each time they attempted this, the outing was cut short because her mother's feet hurt. This was a preventable loss. Education, shoe selection, and regular foot care would have made all the difference.

### How to prepare for a long walk, hike, or outdoor ceremony:

- Trim your toenails about a week before an event so that the toe tips are not too tender.
- Do some intrinsic muscle exercises to strengthen the feet—like ankle rotations and crunching and splaying your toes.
- On the day of the event, rub your feet with good moisturizer, like coconut oil (no petroleum products).
- Wear well-fitting, moisture-wicking socks made of merino wool or alpaca and make sure your shoes are properly secured.