

# Not a walk in the park for

## New treatments use shock or sound waves to relieve intense heel pain

If you're in a tizzy about heel pain that just won't go away, you may be even more frustrated in trying to settle on the right kind of treatment for it. Two different alternative treatments now available each claim success from both the podiatrists who administer the treatment and the patients who receive them.

After receiving conventional treatments from three different doctors, including cortisone shots, orthopedic shoe inserts and chiropractic interventions, 82 year-old Albert Wallace found himself back where he started — in pain and unable to play golf or participate in his volunteer activities.

Wallace, who had developed calcification that resulted in a painful bone spur, is one of an estimate million Canadians affected by heel pain, but he finally found comfort through a treatment that uses shock waves to relieve heel pain.

Sheldon Nadal, a Toronto podiatrist, used extracorporeal shock-wave therapy or ESWT on Wallace.

The non-invasive one-time treatment, priced at \$1,500, offers hope especially for people with spurs or a more common condition called chronic plantar fasciitis which is an inflammation of the fibrous tissue on the bottom of the foot that connects our heel bone and toes.

### Plantar fasciitis

"Any adult can get this," says Nadal of plantar fasciitis. "Typically it hurts when the patient gets out of bed in the morning. When he walks around it gets a little better, but if he stands a lot or walks it hurts at the end of the day. It hurts most typically in the morning and following a period of rest."

ESWT is a piece of equipment that works not unlike lithotripsy, which uses shock waves to pulverize stones in the gallbladder or kidney. In the case of heel spurs, Nadal freezes the heel area, then uses ESWT at four shocks per second to break down calcification. The treatment is over in about half an hour, and though there can be tenderness for several days after, patients can walk immediately. Nadal gives top marks to ESWT but says it is not the first line of treatment but rather something to be considered when physiotherapy, orthotics and even cortisone injections have failed.

"Before this I was doing surgery where I would release a part of the plantar fascia," says Nadal, who has used ESWT for six months. "The surgery works, but there is more down time with it."

Hartley Miltchin, another Toronto podiatrist, also uses new technology to relieve heel pain but his involves radial soundwave therapy or RST. The instrument utilizes air pressure at 85 km per hour to create high intensity acoustic sound waves that are painlessly directed at the painful heel.

"In theory, what is happening is three things: One, it's releasing the body's natural chemical pain relievers called endorphins. Two, it is deadening some of the nerve endings where it is painful. And three, it is changing the metabolism to develop new blood vessels in the area to heal any tear in the heel."

The procedure is used for plantar fasciitis and also for heel pain caused by achilles tendonitis. Achilles tendonitis is not only related to athletes, it is common in women who wear high heels or those individuals who are not very flexible.

With RST, no local anesthesia is needed, and the painless procedure (\$600 for three sessions) takes three minutes. "Patients walk right after," Miltchin explains. "They might have a little bruising, so I advise them to apply ice."

Heel pain robs people of life's little pleasures, he says.

"I have seen mostly heel pain in my office. These people have had incredible pain, many of them for months or years. The pain they feel is agonizing. The first time they put their feet on the floor in the morning, they are in pain. Cortisone is a bandaid solution but doesn't really heal the heel."

Miltchin says that conditions such as plantar fasciitis can also be treated through endoscopic surgery which he also does. RST, however, is non-invasive. He also says that one of the best conservative approaches to treating heel pain associated with plantar fasciitis is to use orthotics to change the me-



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Marilyn Linton  
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chanics of the foot so that the foot is not over-pronating.

Patients with heel pain are reminded of it from the first time they open their eyes each morning. "A lot of these people don't know where to turn. They are not only in pain but also frustrated," says Miltchin.

### Worth the expense?

Both Miltchin and Nadal, neither of whom have used their technology for more than six months, believe they are offering the public non-invasive heel pain options. But the jury is still out as to whether either treatment is worth the cash laid out by sufferers.

In fact, a recent article in the *Journal of*



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*the American Medical Association* or *JAMA* concludes that ESWT treatment doesn't work at all for plantar fasciitis. Nadal says that the article in *JAMA* reported on a study in which low-intensity treatments were used, whereas his treatment is high intensity and thus successful. Miltchin says that his equipment is different, though probably uses the same principle.

Both say that patients speak for the success of the treatments. "It's miserable," says Nadal of chronic heel pain. "If you ignore it, it can go on and on. My advice to anyone experiencing heel pain is to see a podiatrist."