

# Chattanooga: Podiatrists warn of dangers of overusing flip-flops

By Ben Doak, Staff Writer

Flip-flops may be as essential to summer as ice cream, but like their warm-weather counterpart, they should be enjoyed in moderation. As comfortable, fashionable footwear, their benefits may belie their potential to damage people's legs and feet, experts say.

Because flip-flop straps are located at the base of the toes, flip-flops cause stress on two major areas of the body: the Achilles tendon and the big toe, said Dr. Chris Segler of the Ankle & Foot Center of Chattanooga. As the toes curl to hold the flip-flop in place, wearers alter their gait and place themselves in danger of injury.

There are ways to limit the risk, he said.

"Look for flip-flops made of high-quality, soft leather," said Dr. Segler. "That's helpful because it can reduce the potential of blisters, as opposed to materials like plastic or some foam materials, which can cause more irritation."

He also recommends choosing flip-flops that have substantial arch support built into them.

Dr. Segler said a simple test can be helpful when buying flip-flops.

He recommends bending the flip-flop from end to end to make sure the shoe bends only at the toe, not at the arch.

"That certainly is going to provide more support and more decreased risk in having problems than if it will simply fold in half anywhere along the flip-flop," he said.

Another no-no is wearing flip-flops when they are past their prime. Any shoe that is obviously deformed from wear-and-tear should be tossed out.

"When the heel becomes compressed, it's time (for them) to be replaced," said Dr. Segler. "If you continue to try to wear them year after year, although they may feel comfortable, they just can't stand up to the abuse, given the limited cushioning material that can be incorporated into flip-flops."

The general rule is for the heel to be positioned higher than the toes or the ball of the foot. When the heel height compresses at the same level or below the ball of the foot, it's time to replace them, Dr. Segler said.

Flip-flops are not for everyone. Those with diabetes should consult their podiatrist, as any loss of feeling in the foot may make their use dangerous. A low arch also may create risk.

"I'm not anti flip-flops," said Dr. C. Jason Wamack of Chattanooga Foot Specialists. "However, if you have really flat feet, they will put a strain on the arch because of a lack of support. There is a tendon that runs specifically on the inside of the arch, called the posterior tibial tendon, and that tendon can be stressed over a period of time, giving arch pain and ankle pain. Conversely, as that happens, you can get intermittent leg pain, because of how much or lack of support from the arch and the ankle."

It often takes a podiatrist to recognize feet with a low arch, commonly known as flat feet, but Dr. Wamack says one indication is feeling your arch hit the ground when walking barefoot.

Even if you know your feet are ready for flip-flops, it is important to wear them responsibly.

"I was wearing flip-flops in my barn, and I accidentally stepped on a pitchfork," said Vallarie Pratt, 32, of Dalton, Ga. "It went straight through my foot." Ms. Pratt said the misstep strained her foot and caused an infection.



# Flip-flop flap

The sandals are great for the beach, but everyday wear can lead to foot problems or ankle injury.

## Problems caused

### Short term

- Provides little protection, risks:
- Stubbed toes
  - Blisters
  - Cuts
  - Slips cause fractures, sprains
  - Sunburn

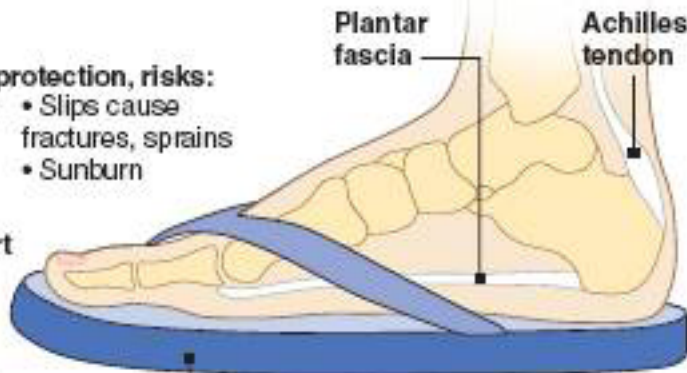
### Long term

#### Lack of support could cause:

- Tendinitis
- Arch pain, collapse
- Plantar fasciitis (heel pain)
- Arthritis of ankle, knee or hip

#### Unnatural walk

- Hammer toes (toe staying contracted) can develop from toe gripping
- Heel calluses can form from repetitive slapping



Flimsy, thin foam (Arch flattens)

## Good shoes

Meant to protect, should:

- Cushion heel
- Support arch
- Absorb impact



Pad thicker at heel, tapers to toe (Foot stabilized)

Source: American Podiatric Medical Association

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Dr. Segler recommends wearing flip-flops only over short distances and breaking them in slowly.

“As long as the sandals are broken in and you know that they work, it’s basically safe to wear them anywhere, provided that it’s in moderation,” he said.

Kelsey Williams, 21, of Hixson blames her flip-flops for a fall on the steps between the Hunter Museum of American Art and the Walnut Street Bridge while on a walk with her fiance, Thom Gallemore of Fairfax, Va.

“That would not have happened had I not been wearing these shoes,” she said.