Back in the early days of my career, I was privileged to work alongside a team of very talented Physiotherapists; I embraced every second of the learning in this environment. One topic that has continually come to the front of my mind in the years since that time is Pes Planus, AKA 'flat feet'.

I vividly remember this particular day at work when one of my Physio colleagues with over 30 years experience was talking with me about her observation that almost everyone over the age of 35 has some degree of fallen arches in their feet. She said that the natural aging process causes the ligaments to slacken and the joints to shift and in her experience this process begins to show itself to a trained eye and hand by 35 years old.

To this day, I think of her when I assess a person’s posture and feet, when I watch people walk, and move, observing for myself that yes, it seems that by age 35, many of us have begun to show signs of shifting in the feet.

In this issue, I thought I’d reflect on this topic and bring to light some important issues to do with our feet - those precious, foundational, often forgotten pieces of ourselves!

Do these shoes look like yours?

A good way to see for yourself if you might be walking on some fallen arches is to take a look at your most well-worn shoes. This picture (Fig.1) shows the misshapen shoes of somebody with severely over pronated feet. ('Pronation' is the medical term used to describe a range of motion or position in the foot that ends up appearing as a 'flat foot')

So go ahead...take a break from reading this and go find your favorite well-loved shoes...now flip them over and take a look at them from the bottom, turn them to look at them from the side, and then the other side. Do you notice a difference from the left and right shoes? Are the soles of the shoes worn out evenly? Is there wearing in one area more than others? Sometimes we can learn a lot about our walking habits and foot structure issues just by looking at our shoes!

If you notice wear patterns on your shoes that are extreme or uneven, it would be a clue to discuss your feet with your manual therapist at a future appointment.
The figure on the left shows a classic 'Pes Planus' as I often see as a Massage Therapist when assessing a person's posture and stance. As you will notice, the inside of the right foot is completely touching the ground. This is what over-pronation looks like. There are of course, varying degrees of flat feet (Pes Planus); this is just one example. It's also important to realize that the feet are complex with many little bones working together in a myriad of ways to give us our base. Pes Planus is only 1 of the possible presentations of a foot. It just happens to be a situation that is common and easy to see.

As with everything else in the body, every person is different, and every body copes with the 'issues in their tissues' differently.

Some people have pain and dysfunction with much less pronation than we see here, while others have found that they have adjusted to their flat feet quite nicely, thank you very much, and do not feel they need to use supports or receive corrective treatment to their feet!

That being said, I have found that most people, regardless of their foot structure do tend to like a soothing foot massage from time to time, for the simple relaxation that it provides:

Click here to discover my Aromatic Foot Reflexology Treatment! This heavenly service is a wonderful way to soothe and restore your feet. I include a custom aromatherapy blend in this service that I make just for you, to take home for some nurturing self-care in the weeks that follow your appointment!

The above picture (Fig 2) is a good example of someone who would likely benefit from using arch support in their shoes. If someone with this foot posture came into my office complaining of pain in their hips or low back, perhaps mentions various injuries sustained to their ankles over the years, notices creaky knees and gets tired with prolonged walking, I would probably talk to them about looking into obtaining some arch support for their feet. Arch support is a simple, non-invasive treatment that can have some incredible benefits. Like every treatment, you only know if it's right for you once you try it.
I am often asked about my opinion on Orthotics - **custom made inserts that fit in your shoes and give support where your feet need it most.** People often seem very concerned when they ask me about Orthotics. Perhaps they have heard negative stories of orthotics being a bad idea, maybe it's the price of custom orthotics that scares them, or perhaps they are nervous because they simply are unclear on the details.

**So in explaining the rationale for arch support, I like to use the analogy of a house.** Our feet are the foundation of our building. The importance of stability at this foundation can best be imagined when looking at Figure above right. If the foundation of your house (your body) **loses its structural integrity**, whether through misalignment, injury or chronic wear and tear, eventually the frame and roof will twist and turn and topple - much as the foundation of this house cracked and then the frame caved in. Doesn't look like a very comfortable house to live in anymore, does it?!

It is true that the body will compensate and cope with structural imbalances as best as it can, and often an amazing job is done for many years. However, more often than not, the body that is not well supported in an anatomically neutral position will struggle to function optimally, **often leading to pain somewhere within the structure.**

Do I agree with my esteemed colleague of many years ago, that after age 35 most of us need some arch support? As a matter of fact, to some extent I do. Let me explain: **For the average, well adjusted foot that is simply aging in a normal way and without much complaint, an expensive, custom built orthotic is not necessary.** However, **good, supportive shoes** are.
enough medial arch support, a few options exist to help remedy this - 2 of which I'll mention here:

**Barefoot Science** is a company that makes a foot strengthening insole. Essentially it is an insert with special cushions that sit in the inner arch. I have tried this product over the last year or so and have been very impressed with the results. If you want to learn more about the Barefoot Science product, check out their website or visit Amazon.ca to learn more or to purchase.

Another system that seems to be proving successful for some is the **Dr. Scholl's custom fit orthotic center.** (It was actually a Chiropractor who recommended this to me originally.) The Dr. Scholl's retail display includes a computerized assessment that chooses the right product for your foot based on the way you stand and move while on their computerized platform. Visit their website to learn more or to find a local distributor. Currently both London Drugs and Superstore in Vernon carry this product.

For more complex foot issues, I recommend an Orthotic Assessment with a professional. Practitioners who make custom Orthotics are specially trained to do so; consultation and assessment is very involved, the follow up is thorough and, if needed, the orthotic will be adjusted for you in the months to follow ensuring that you find the best fit for your particular needs. Often it will be a Chiropractor or Physiotherapist with advanced training in this field who will make your Orthotics. Or you may see a Pedorthist or Pediatrist - both designations indicate 'foot specialist' and would be a good choice for receiving help with your feet.

Registered Massage Therapists are trained to assess and treat a variety of foot issues, and often great relief can be obtained with a little profession attention and some guidance on self-care.

Book your next appointment online by clicking here!
Reflections on Posture and Gait

Gait or walking, is a basic function that we all take for granted, and is actually a very complex process involving many stages, each requiring a level of coordination and strength that is hard to fathom.

Our gait is as much habitual as it is a reflection of our structure. As you can imagine, 'People Watching' is an entirely different experience for a manual therapist; I am always observing the postural and walking habits of the humans around me!

We all have variations in our walking style that give a clue as to the biography of our bodies. Old injuries might come through as a limp or we might favour one side due to the repetitive strain patterns of our daily activities. Our emotional state is often reflected in the way we hold our posture, for example: the sagging shoulders exhibiting the fatigue of a long day or perhaps for someone who has recently received bad news; the rigidity in the spine of someone in shock, or the quickly swaying arms of someone in a rush. It is fascinating to observe body language!

Even at the best of times people tend to develop funny walking patterns. So, you can imagine that when the feet are compromised by injury, pain or structural imbalance your gait will dramatically change from the ideal pattern set forth in the body's blueprint to become a reflection of the challenges you have faced.

Mindful Walking Exercise

I suggest doing some ‘mindful walking’ following a treatment with me in order to help with postural re-education and to help your treatment integrate. Simply put, while taking a gentle 20 minute walk, somewhere flat and easy, just begin to pay attention to your walking habits and how you feel with the movements. Here are some guidelines to get you started:

What position are your feet in as you glance down?  
Are your arms swinging freely and evenly?  
Is your head tilted or turned a little to one side?

Where do you feel strain? Or are you comfortable in your gait?  
Just notice. There is no wrong answer.

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(Please don’t force anything during this exercise and please avoid the temptation to criticize yourself for your imbalances - you are human and part of that experience involves forming some deviations from neutral.)

After a couple of minutes of noticing your normal walking patterns, begin to tune in a little deeper:

*Keep walking, slow down your stride if you need to in order to focus.*
When you slow down does your walking become more awkward? Or smoother; easier? Again, just notice.

*Then speed back up to what is a normal pace for you. Is there more comfort when you adjust your speed?*
Now take a deep breath...and another...

*Do you walk differently when you deepen your breathing?*
Again, just notice.

*Return to a natural breathing rhythm.*

**Have you slowed your walking pace? Are you more relaxed in your stride?**

(This process will only take a few minutes once you get the hang of it!)

*Now focus on the base of your body, the foundation for your gait:*  
Are your feet facing straight ahead?  
If not, try to walk with your toes pointed evenly forward.  
Is that comfortable?

*Take a few more steps. Does this position cause you to feel unstable? Does it create pain?*

Or perhaps it decreases strain in some places and pulls in others...  
Just notice and then return your feet to whatever place is comfortable for you.

*How far apart are your feet? Hip distance? Closer together? Or maybe much further apart?*
Again, just notice.

You can go through the entire body in this manner, bringing attention to each region and allowing yourself to try a more neutral stance. (If you are unclear on a neutral position for a region, please ask me to show you. I’d be happy to help you!)

You may find that gradually you will find comfort in a more neutral structure. Structure governs function in the body - so the closer to neutral we can be, the easier our daily activities tend to be.

*To help you visualize a 'stacked' structure for your body when you are standing, Ask yourself:*  
Are my feet under my hips?  
Are my hips under my ribs?  
Are my ribs under my shoulders?  
Are my shoulders under my head?  
Is my head straight and tall?  
Where am I in space?

These simple questions will bring awareness instantly to each region and help you to find comfort in your gait. Once you learn to practice ‘mindful walking’, it is a tool available to you whenever you need a little structural tune-up. I invite you to try this exercise the next time you are taking a walk outside, ideally in a soothing, natural setting where you can relax and focus without the worry of traffic and crosswalks!

Please do tell me what you think of this exercise; your feedback is always appreciated.

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For more wellness tips,
feel free to view my past newsletter articles by clicking here!

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About Cascade Massage Therapy

My Approach

I bring over 18 years of bodywork experience and education to the massage table! I offer you diverse and comprehensive massage therapy sessions. Your treatment goals are foremost and your needs will be heard and addressed. I utilize both traditional and alternative treatment techniques, and recommend self care tips and exercise options that evolve with your individual healing process.

My intention is to be a facilitator in the cascade of your healing process and health maintenance. I believe that within the human body is the desire and ability to be well, and through bodywork, I serve to act as a catalyst for this process.

This is your time - I encourage you to enjoy the stillness of your session, and sense the changes occurring in your body while we work - you don't need to be entertaining or start a conversation; that being said, please recognize that I do not read minds. I expect my clients to participate in his or her experience and give feedback when there is any discomfort during the treatment.

Cascade Massage Therapy is focused on education and prevention. It is important that you know what you can do to help prevent stress, tension, and pain when you are not with me. I allow for time at the end of our session to converse, suggest self care tips and exercises that would be beneficial for you, and answer any questions that you may have.

I believe that prolonged stress, whether environmental, physical or emotional is a primary factor in dis-ease and a true obstacle to healing. Therefore, I welcome you to a peace-filled and relaxing environment where you can experience relief from pain and tension.

If you have specific health concerns consult your medical doctor.

The information in this newsletter is educational only and is not intended to replace the advice of your personal health care providers.

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