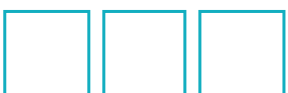




LIVE FIT

The Crazy Thing That Can Happen to Your Feet

*Recent studies show that foot fitness—
and these 5 exercises—can help prevent
bunions and plantar fasciitis, ward off*



shin splints, and, quite possibly, save your life.

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If you're like most people, you probably do not spend a ton of time, if any, thinking about the muscles in your feet. In fact, you likely can't even name them. Think about it: You know your biceps and triceps are in your upper arms. You're certainly aware that the front side of your thighs is your quads, and the back sides are your hamstrings. But the muscles that lets you lift your big toe and press it against the ground, that's called...uh....the, um...

Abductor hallucis is the phrase you're looking for. You were just about to say that, right? You can group it in with a larger formation of muscles known as the *plantar intrinsics*, a not-particularly-well-understood group that both begin and end within the confines of the foot.

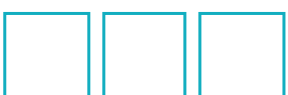
Only recently, researchers have been able to take a detailed look at what, exactly, these muscles do.



a biomechanics research fellow at the University of Queensland in Australia. His work over the past five years has shown that the plantar intrinsics play a crucial role in [maintaining balance](#), especially when you are standing on one leg.

Why is this important? One of the biggest risks you'll face during your life is falling. In fact, falls are the number one [cause of injuries and death](#) among older Americans. Whether you're a senior or a millennial (or somewhere in between), those tiny-but-crucial muscles in your foot that keep you upright are getting weaker by the moment. A recent [study](#) released in March 2017 examined toe flexor (part of the plantar intrinsics) strength in more than 1,400 men and found it was a good indicator of one's body composition and metabolic health. It also showed that an age-related decline in strength developed earlier in the toe flexors than it did the grip (another [effective predictor](#) of a long, healthy life), and that strength dropped more sharply.

All of which is to say that the little muscles in your feet are a bigger deal than you think, and not just

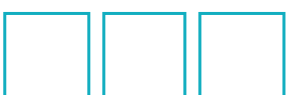


bunions, plantar fasciitis, and shin splints (although all of this is true). The strength of your feet and toes is reflective of your strength overall.

Related: [An Active Alignment Sequence for Feet and Femurs to Improve Posture](#)

“The body is a unit,” says Sonima’s pain and anatomy advisor [Pete Egoscue](#). “No matter what our brilliant minds do to treat a specific symptom, the entire body is impacted. The body treats itself globally.” Which means you can strengthen your feet, and it will improve posture and balance throughout your entire body. It also means that some of the exercises you’ll use to improve your foot strength involve more than just those two things you’re standing on.

Here are five foot-strengthening exercises—including four from Egoscue’s book *Pain Free*—that help counteract the dysfunctional loading of our feet, restore them to their proper alignment, and



strengthen the muscles helping to keep you upright.

1. Foot Circles and Point Flexes

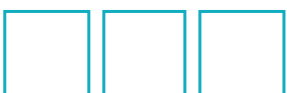
Lie flat on your back. Bend one knee toward your chest while leaving the other leg flat on the floor, toes pointing straight up at the ceiling. Interlace your fingers behind your elevated knee, then circle the foot of your bent leg in a clockwise direction. Do 30 rotations, then do the same number counterclockwise. Switch legs and repeat.



For the Point Flexes, start from the same one-leg-up



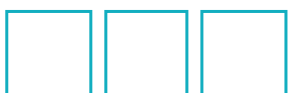
movement of your lifted foot is akin to pumping the brake of your car. Point your toes away from your body, then lift them toward your shin. Repeat that motion 20 times, then switch legs.





2. Supine Calf/Hamstring Stretch

Stay on your back but this time bend one knee so that your foot can rest flat against the floor. Lift your opposite leg and wrap a strap or stretch band around the ball of your foot. Use the strap to help guide the leg toward your face until it forms about a 45-degree angle with your body (or until you feel a stretch sensation in your calf – you don't want to push it like crazy here). Hold the stretch for 30 to 45 seconds. Then repeat with the other leg lifted.





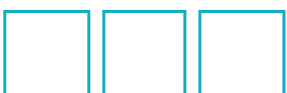
The Hamstring Stretch is the same as the calf stretch for the most part. The main difference is that the strap should wrap around your arch (mid-foot), rather than the ball of your foot. Lift your leg until it forms about a 90-degree angle with your torso or until you feel sensation in your hamstrings (again: don't try to be a hero here). Keep both sides of your butt pressed flat against the floor and hold for 30 seconds.





3. Static Extension

Kneel on a block or chair with your hands on the floor, directly under your shoulders. Relax your head and back toward the floor and let your shoulder blades come toward one another. Your back should be arched with your belly toward the floor. Keeping your elbows locked, slide your hips forward six to eight inches so that they are in front of, and not aligned overtop of, your knees. Hold the stretch for one to two minutes.





4. Wall Sit (or “Air Bench”)

Stand with your back against a wall. Press the small of your back against the wall as you walk your feet

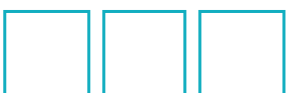


when both your knees and your hips are bent 90 degrees. If the sensation on your knees is too intense, lift your body up to relieve the pressure. Hold for one to three minutes.



5. Janda's "Shortfoot"

This exercise dates back to one of the forefathers of biomechanics, Vladimir Janda. A 2016 [study](#) showed it effectively activated the plantar intrinsic muscles



foot-lengths in front of the other, then raise and lower the toes of the forward foot 20 to 30 times. Switch legs and repeat.





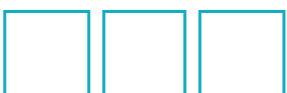
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