

Do You Really Need Orthotics?

What the Research Says

Evidence-based guidance for plantar heel pain – not sales talk

ORTHOTICS: MIRACLE FIX OR OVERHYPED CRUTCH?

It's one of the first things people are told when they have heel pain: "Get some insoles."

But do they actually work? And do you need them?

This leaflet looks at what the clinical research says about orthotics for plantar heel pain (often referred to as plantar fasciitis) – what helps, when, and for whom. It also shows how they fit (or don't) into a broader recovery plan.

1 WHAT ORTHOTICS CAN DO – ACCORDING TO THE EVIDENCE

✓ **Reduce strain on the plantar fascia**
Insoles can help offload stress on the arch, particularly in people with flat feet or excessive pronation.

🔍 A 2021 review found custom and prefabricated orthotics both reduced pain, especially in the first 3 months

✓ **Short-term pain relief**
They're especially helpful early on or during painful flare-ups.

🔍 Multiple studies show that orthotics can improve symptoms in the short to medium term, especially when combined with other treatments like stretching

✓ **Improve comfort during standing/walking**

For people on their feet all day, even over-the-counter insoles can make walking more tolerable and reduce end-of-day pain.

2 WHAT ORTHOTICS DON'T DO

✗ **They don't fix plantar heel pain alone**
Orthotics reduce load – but they don't address tight calves, weak foot muscles, or poor gait patterns. Without stretching, strength work, and load management, pain may return when you stop using them.

✗ **They don't work for everyone**
Research shows some people benefit greatly, while others feel no difference. Factors like foot type, activity level, and shoe compatibility matter.

✗ **Custom isn't always better**
🔍 A 2008 randomised trial found no significant difference between custom orthotics and off-the-shelf ones in reducing heel pain.

3 SO... SHOULD YOU USE THEM? HERE'S A GOOD RULE OF THUMB:

You might benefit from orthotics if you:

- Have flat feet or very high arches
- Stand or walk long hours on hard surfaces
- Notice pain worsening in unsupportive footwear
- Are in the early painful stage and need relief

But don't stop there.

Use them as part of a full plan – including stretching, strengthening, activity modification, and proper footwear. "Insoles helped me cope with the pain... but the real fix was doing the exercises my physio gave me." – Patient feedback from a multidisciplinary clinic.

4 CHOOSING THE RIGHT ORTHOTICS

- **Over-the-counter insoles:** Great first step; affordable and widely available
- **Semi-custom / heat-moulded options:** A middle-ground with better fit and support
- **Fully custom orthotics:** Consider if pain is severe, foot posture is extreme, or you've tried everything else
- **Make sure your shoes fit the insoles**

Wearing great orthotics in bad shoes = wasted effort

Bottom line:

Orthotics aren't a cure – they're a tool.

They can reduce pain, improve comfort, and support healing – but they're not a shortcut.

The best outcomes happen when orthotics are combined with:

- Daily stretching (especially calf and fascia)
- Strength work for foot and lower leg
- Gradual return to walking or sport
- Professionally guided support if needed

WANT TO TRY ORTHOTICS?

Talk to a physiotherapist, osteopath, chiropractor, podiatrist, or sports therapist – they'll help you figure out if they're right for your feet, not just someone else's advice. If you have questions, get in touch.

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