



Cranbury Therapeutic Massage
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Building Strong Healthy Feet

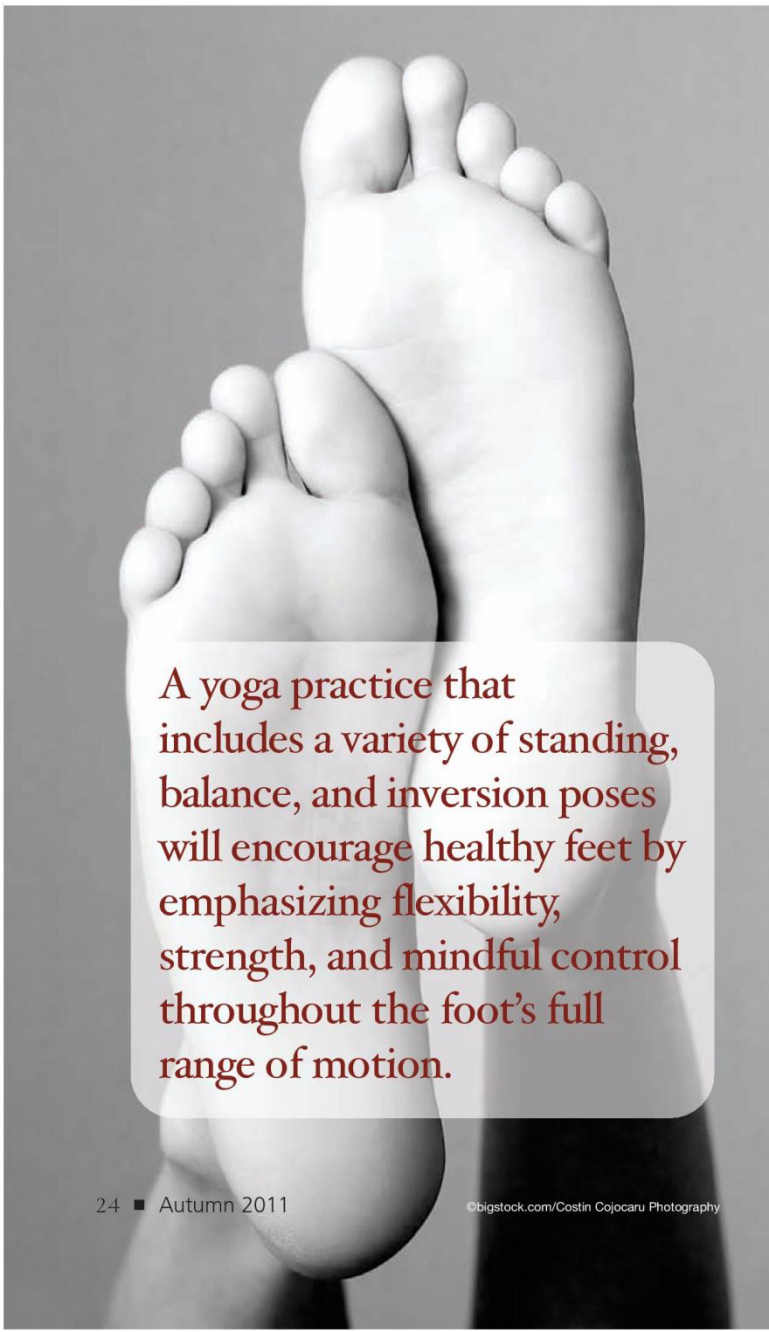
by Nancy Sheehan

Our feet are as crucial to robust health as posture, breathing, or a strong core. They are complex structures designed to support the weight of the entire body with each foot containing twenty-six bones, thirty-two joints, fifty-six ligaments and thirty-eight muscles! Often we take their genius design for granted, but learning to care for your feet properly can enhance both your yoga practice and overall health.

Although yoga classes at all levels pay close attention to the feet, feet are a particular focus of beginning instruction. This focus is best captured by renowned teacher B.K.S. Iyengar's oft repeated saying, "You want to stand on your head and you don't even know how to stand on your feet." Learning to balance on all 4 corners of the foot is a staple of beginner classes and is essential for supporting the rest of the body. By making sure that the big toe, little toe, inner heel, and outer heel are all rooted firmly to the ground, we build a strong foundation for our yoga practice and all of our activities.

A yoga practice that includes a variety of standing, balance, and inversion poses will encourage healthy feet by emphasizing flexibility, strength, and mindful control throughout the foot's full range of motion. The standing poses require attention to the 4 corners mentioned above while at the same time encouraging unique patterns of muscular contractions and stretching for each pose. This makes standing pose practice a great all-around-foot-conditioning system. Likewise, in inversions, we practice keeping our feet active and aligned because they are integral to maintaining the lines of energy in the legs. Finally, mastering challenging balance poses will improve the ability to maintain connection with all 4 corners of the foot. This can improve balance in all activities and prevent falls, especially for yogis of advanced age. In effect, strong balance practice can be an effective anti-aging technique!

Tension in the feet restricts their natural movement and interferes with the body's ability to pump blood back to the



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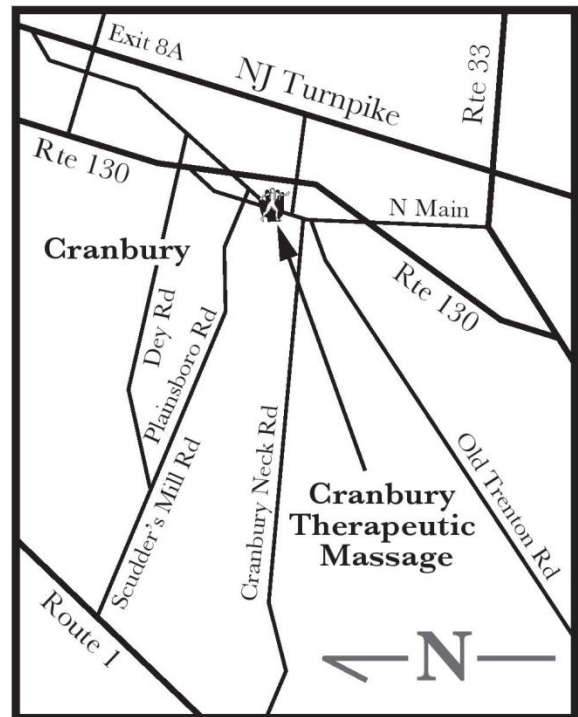
heart. Therefore, at times, foot health can profoundly affect the health of the body in general. Massage can be an important partner in foot health that helps relieve tight muscles and trigger points in the foot. For at home treatment, try placing a tennis ball under your foot, just in front of the heel. Then, roll the ball around under your foot to release tension. I'd also recommend adding Reflexology to your regular massage appointments with your therapist. This is a technique based on the principle that reflex points located in the feet and hands correspond to glands and organs in the body. The treatments involve stimulating specific points on the hand and foot which helps to naturally alleviate internal health problems in the associated glands and organs. Pressure received in the feet also sends signals to the brain that helps balance the nervous system. As a result, stress and pain are also reduced, yielding an immediate relaxing effect. About 7,000 nerves are stimulated during a treatment, so blood circulation increases, the immune system is activated, and the body is better able to rid itself of toxins. Reflexology also feels good. The sense of calm and peace—and the attention paid to sore, overworked feet—keeps folks coming back for more. A delicious foot rub is one of life's pleasures!

In addition to caring for our feet with regular massage and yoga practice, choosing shoes that contribute to foot health is extremely important. Shoes provide the foundation needed for healthy posture. While some people stuff their feet into silly or stressful shoes, others focus on providing a healthy space for feet to move and breathe. High, wedged shoes limit your capacity to interact directly with the ground and make you susceptible to ankle injury. Slip-on shoes are a hindrance because they encourage leaning back and scuffing. Thong sandals are also problematic because they require you to contract your toes to carry the shoe along. We want the bottoms of our feet, the plantar fascia, to be flexible and relaxed. Choose shoes with firm but flexible soles that feel good under the arches and that have straps or laces that bind the foot securely to the bottom of the shoe. Shoes should also include a broad toe box to allow the ball of the foot to function like a hinge and provide the room needed for toes to spread and lengthen during push off. If toes are crowded together, the foot and the whole body loses power during push off so walking is less efficient. Spend your shoe dollars on support and comfort rather than style.

When we consider how much we rely on our feet, Mr. Iyengar's encouraging us to learn how to "stand on your own two feet" appears to be sound advice not just for yoga, but for our entire lives. Stand strong and take good care of these organs of perception that root, balance, and adapt us to the ground of our being! 🙏.

Nancy Sheehan LMT is owner/director of Cranbury Therapeutic Massage. For information visit cranburymassage.com.

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