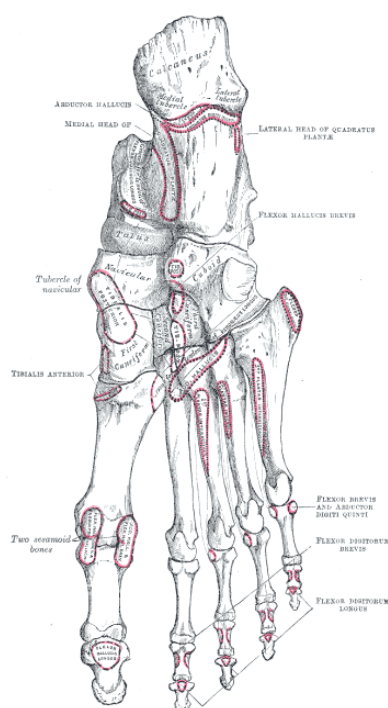




On Your Toes by Michelle Valentino

Since April is National Foot Health Awareness Month, it's a good time to consider an oft-neglected part of our anatomy: our feet, and in particular, our toes.



Many of us have lost our connection to our toes. If we wear conventional shoes, our toes are crammed into toe-boxes that distort their natural shapes, with positive heels that subject the whole front of the foot to added pressure. Wearing flip flops, mules or clogs with no backs results in increased toe gripping and chronically tense toe muscles.

As a result, despite years of hatha practice, many of us have toes that don't move very much, or even curl, hook, hammer, face different directions or push sideways into bunions. Clearly, there's room for improvement. Working with the muscles around the toes can enhance balance, prevent several types of foot pain, and permit quicker, more agile movement.

In asana practice, it's helpful to understand the difference between gripping the floor with the toes (which exacerbates what our shoes are doing to us) and extending or lengthening them. Let's use mountain pose as an example.

The typical instruction about the foundation in *tadasana* is to place the feet parallel, weight equally distributed between them, and grounding—feeling both the inner and



outer edges of the foot as well as the heel firmly on the ground.

Once you have placed your feet, you can continue to refine the pose by establishing the correct toe position. Lift and lengthen the soles of the feet from the middle of the arch forward, pressing into the ball of the foot and the heel, spreading all of the toes wide. Then set them down without gripping, keeping the ball of the foot and the heel on the floor. This helps strengthen the arch of the foot. Eventually you should be able to spread the toes without lifting them.

If your toes do not spread easily, you might try the following exercises to get them in better working order:

- With raised arches, lift all 5 toes of both feet upward, then lower them back down. Repeat this slowly 5 to 10 times.
- Next, with raised arches, lift only both big toes, keeping the other four on the ground, then lower them back down. Try to lift your big toe straight up—not toward the others. Then lower it back down. Repeat this slowly 5 to 10 times. Then try lifting up each of the other toes in turn and setting them back down.

Don't be discouraged if the movements don't come easily. These exercises might require a gradual re-learning of lost muscle control. If so, you can help yourself this way: keeping your spine long, you can bend your knees and bend down forward to use your fingers to help hold the other toes down while you are learning the new patterns.

To learn more about foot health, especially the impact of footwear, come to the [Foot Camp workshop](#) on Saturday, April 11. ॐ

