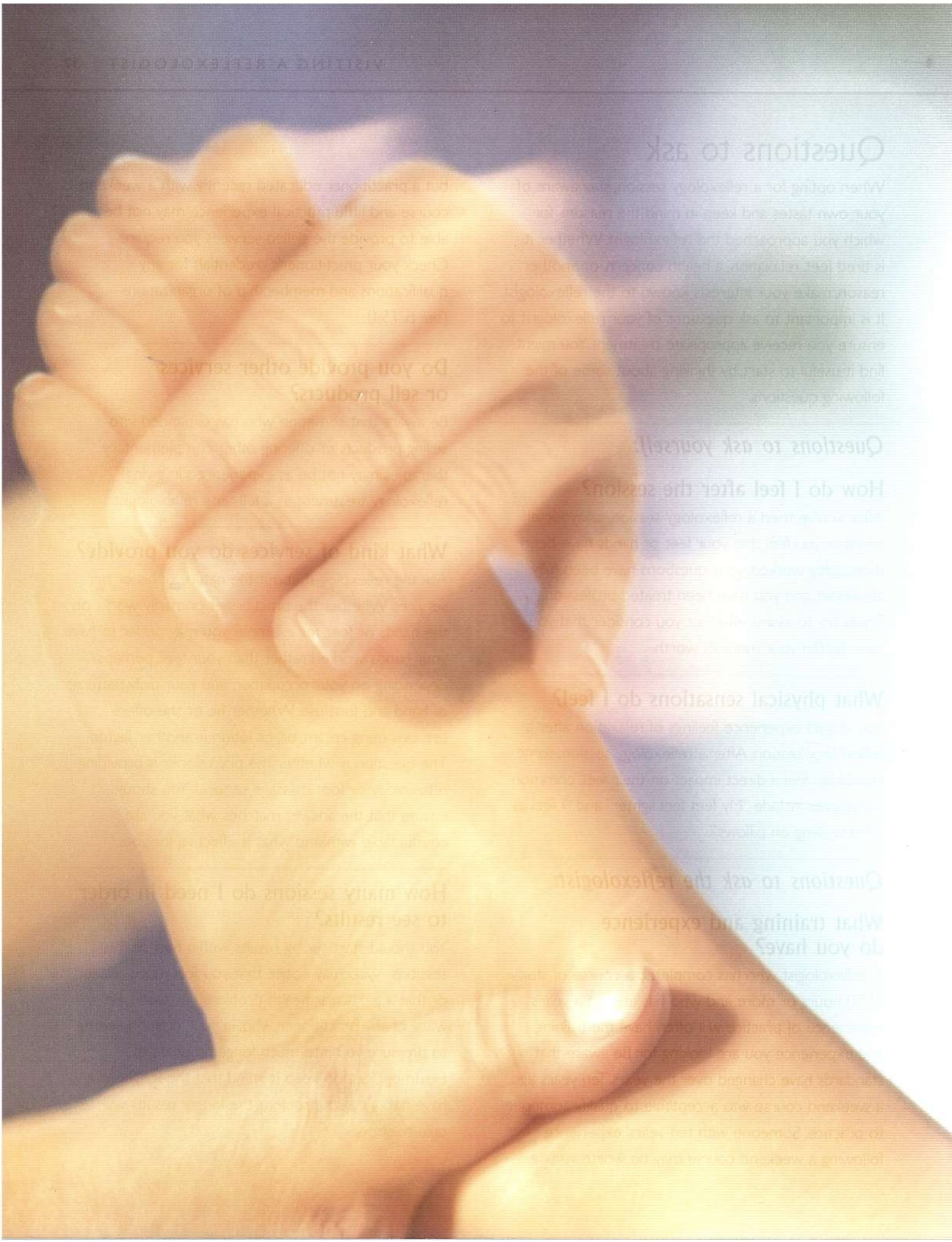
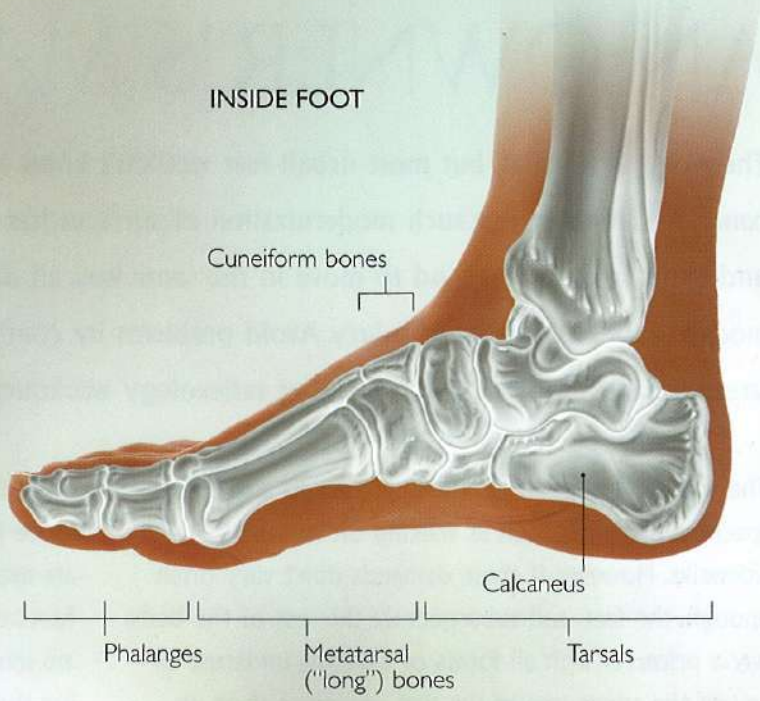
TAKING CARE OF HANDS AND FEET

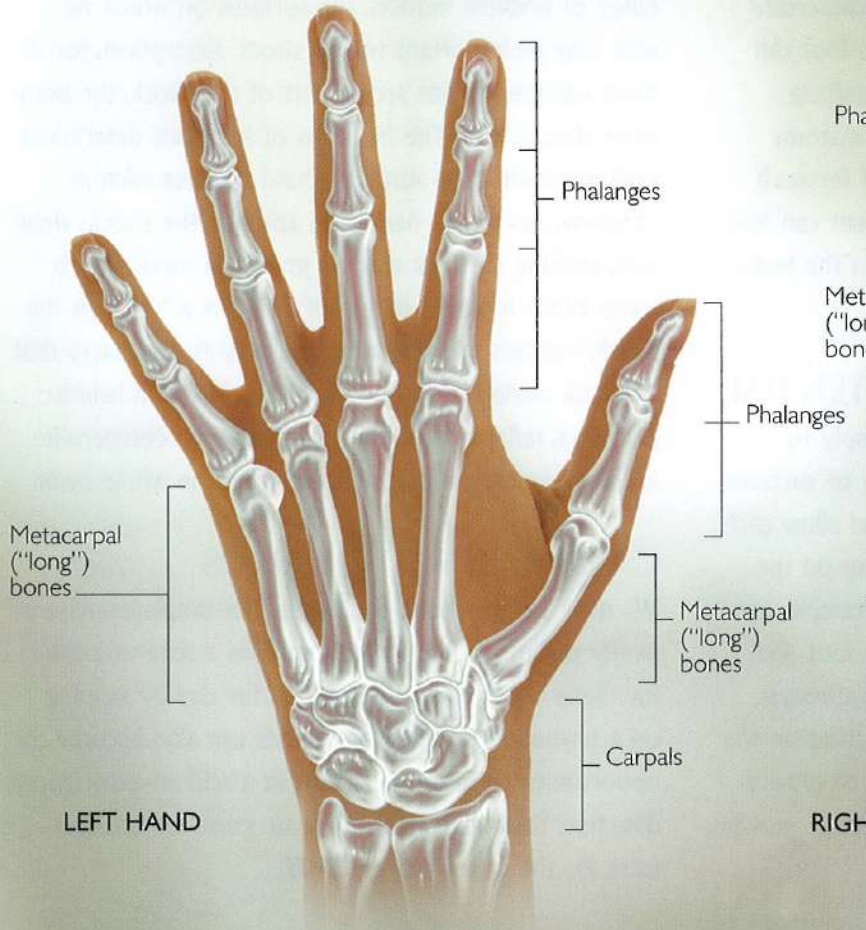
With all the stresses and strains your hands and feet experience on a day-to-day basis, it's no wonder that regular reflexology sessions are such a healthy treat. In this chapter you'll find tips on using self-help tools to relax your feet and hands, as well as advice on how to break up potentially harmful "stress patterns" caused by repetitive daily activities such as walking or typing. In this chapter we also explain what kinds of shoes you should—and should never—wear.



Bones in the feet and hands

The bones of the hands and feet reflect their different uses: the phalanges in the toes, for example, are much shorter than those of the fingers because the toes are only used for balance and lift, while the fingers are used for grip. The intricate bones of the feet are strong enough to support the weight of the entire body, yet light enough to move easily. The little carpal bones of the wrist and metacarpals in the fingers operate together as a sophisticated set of levers with the opposable thumbs to provide the grasping action.





FEET AND HANDS: AN OWNER'S MANUAL

The world is not flat, but most urban feet wouldn't know it. Cobblestone roads have given way to concrete sidewalks, but such modernization of surfaces has resulted in a loss of texture and variety underfoot, and so feet tend to move in the same way, all day, every day. This repeated stress leaves the modern foot susceptible to injury. Avoid problems by combining the advice that follows for feet (and stressed hands, too) with your regular reflexology workouts.

The foot is very good at adapting itself to a set of specified demands, such as walking on smooth sidewalks. However, if these demands don't vary often enough, the feet, and subsequently the rest of the body, pay a price. As with all forms of exercise, underuse of any of the structures of the feet can cause them to suffer from a decline in strength, and this can create complex, often subtle, health problems. The foot can also adapt itself to stressful situations by shifting responsibility from the correct part of its anatomy onto another part that may be ill-designed for such functions. Such repetitive incorrect movement can lead to an uneven displacement of weight within the body, which results in tight, restricted muscles.

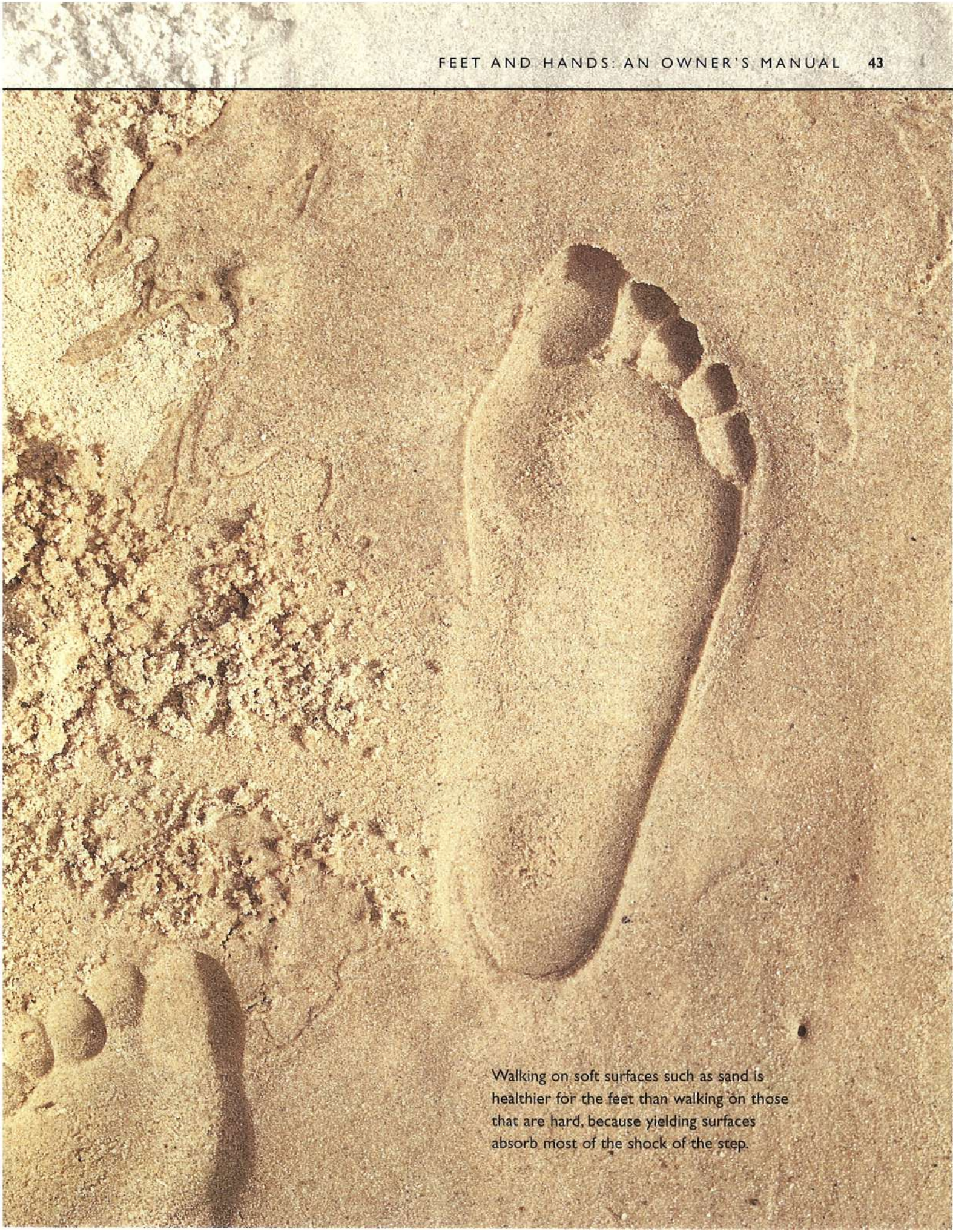
RESTORING THE FOOT'S POTENTIAL

The health of the feet can be improved simply by walking, running, and standing on a variety of surfaces that stimulate different pressure sensors and allow each foot to use its full range of motion. Walking on the textured surfaces of health pathways, for example, can stimulate neglected pressure sensors in the foot and break up ingrained stress patterns. Health pathways, such as those suggested on pages 46–49, combine the benefits for the feet of the downward pull of gravity with a variety of surface textures that challenge muscles, tendons, bones, and sensors.

The foot reacts to varying terrain through its ability to move in four basic directions. The most-used directions are experienced during the heel-to-toe movement of a footstep. Two less common directions used by the feet are inward and outward movements. Practicing exercises for these four directions gives back to the foot its full range of possible motion. The surfaces on which we walk play an important role in shock absorption, too. If these surfaces do not accept part of the shock, the body must absorb it all. The hardness of a surface determines how much shock it absorbs—hard surfaces such as concrete, asphalt, or hardwood absorb little shock, while soft, yielding surfaces such as grass and sand absorb more. While it would be nice if life were a "walk on the beach," walkers today most commonly face surfaces that are hard, unyielding, and unforgiving. Through health pathways, reflexology offers the chance to compensate for one's environment and so to relax the whole body.

CARING FOR THE HANDS

We must not overlook the hands. The simple exercise of gently pulling on the fingers provides a mini-vacation for digits compressed throughout the day by tapping on a keyboard. Wringing the hands can also become an opportunity to move the hands in a seldom-experienced direction. Basic exercises similar to those for the feet exist for the hands (*see pp. 54–55*).



Walking on soft surfaces such as sand is healthier for the feet than walking on those that are hard, because yielding surfaces absorb most of the shock of the step.

CHOOSING SHOES

On natural surfaces, the bare foot works best, but researchers have found that going barefoot is not ideal on surfaces such as concrete. With only the padding of the heel, bare feet provide no insulation against the shock of a hard surface. Therefore, the right shoes have an enormous impact on the well-being of your feet, as well as on the rest of the body. Follow the advice below, and finding the best footwear for you will become second nature. If in doubt, remember the following maxim: do not buy or wear shoes that hurt.

Size: you may think you know your shoe size, but you may not know the size of an adult foot can change, especially for women during pregnancy. A child's foot size changes as many as 26 times. Have your feet measured when you buy shoes, and you may find that, like most people, one foot is larger than the other. Buy for the larger foot. To ensure a proper fit, shop for shoes in the late afternoon or evening after any swelling has already occurred.

Comfort: don't buy shoes solely for their stylishness or appearance, but for how comfortable your foot feels wearing them. A poorly designed shoe could look fashionable, but if it hurts your foot, your entire body may suffer. A shoe with a high heel, for example, pitches body weight forward onto the balls of the feet, placing a heavy demand on the wearer to maintain an awkward posture. Pointed-toed shoes do not allow the toes to play their role in walking. A low kitten-heeled shoe provides a too-small base on which to balance and walk. Platform shoes can lead to twisted ankles, and high-tech running shoes have a limited lifespan. All these shoes may look great, but could do a great deal of damage to

Bare feet

The feet act as a base for the body, holding it upright and stable. They also propel the body forward in motion. The foot absorbs any shock incurred from movement, and disperses the body's weight evenly throughout its structures, so although walking barefoot is good on soft surfaces, hard structures may cause damage.

Sandals

This type of footwear does not have the restrictive, and often painful, toe boxes that are characteristic of other shoes. It should be noted, however, that although they may be comfortable, not all sandals have the support necessary for walking on hard surfaces, walking for long distances, or running.

the feet. Remember, too, that even well-made shoes can become dangerous once they wear out. That favorite pair of shoes that has finally broken in may actually have broken down.

Socks: when shoe shopping, try to wear the type of socks or hose you would usually sport with the shoe. You should be able to lay your toes flat and wiggle them inside the shoe.

Shape: the shape of a shoe should match the shape of your foot. If the long bones and the toes—integral structures for movement—become tight and unyielding, it can put strain on the little toe and outside of the foot, rather than on the big toe and inside of the foot, where it belongs. If foot muscles are sufficiently out of balance, the long bones of the foot will end up doing most of the work, rather than the toes. In this severe case, the toes often curl. So if you have a square foot, you should wear a square shoe. If your foot is wide across the ball, the shoe you buy should match, and if your foot or heel is narrow, choose footwear accordingly. Consider a shoe that ties if your arch is so high that the top of your foot rubs the top of the shoe: laces can accommodate this hereditary feature.

Sole: choose a shoe appropriate for the surface on which you most often walk. A soft-soled shoe is preferable for most surfaces—it absorbs some of the shock that a hard floor repels. However, researchers at the Nike Corporation have found evidence that suggests that hard-soled shoes may be more appropriate for standing on hard surfaces. As the body struggles to maintain a standing position, the muscles necessary to keep the body upright constantly shift. The stable pedestal offered by a hard-soled shoe works best for a foot that is constantly shifting in place.

Soft shoes

A new generation of shoes has recently been developed specifically for walking at work, for sports, and for leisure. They have in common the factors of a soft sole, a wide toe box to allow for toe spread, a flexible sole, a low heel, and materials that allow air to circulate around the entire foot.

High heels

Any heel over two inches imposes deformity on the body: shortened calf muscles, metatarsal damage, and problems in the lower back, shoulders, and neck. Studies show that high heels require greater expenditure of energy over a distance. That tired feeling at the end of a day can result from the self-imposed handicap of heels.

HEALTH PATHWAYS

We call health pathways "Disneyland for the feet" because they take the structures of the feet on a brief vacation from their regular job. Every day, the foot bears all the weight of the body, adjusting in response to changes in terrain underfoot. A health pathway uses this weight to turn the mundane activity of walking into a unique sensory experience for the feet that reduces stress not only in the foot itself, but throughout the body. By using health pathways, you can lift your arches while lifting your spirits.

LEARNING TIP

To test the level of challenge appropriate for your foot, place a broomstick on the floor and stand on it. If you feel that the object exerts a safe amount of stress on your foot, try stepping on the broomstick with both feet. Experiment by rhythmically rocking from side to side, or moving it beneath different parts of the foot. If you feel uncomfortable, use the variations shown opposite.

Health pathways are walkways, commercially produced or homemade, composed of unusually shaped items. Walking along these pathways on bare feet stimulates previously neglected parts of the feet, thereby breaking up the stress of repetitive actions on the feet and extending to relieve stress throughout the body.

The tradition of health pathways is enjoying a revival among many health-seekers in Asia. The idea recalls the Japanese legend that Samurai warriors would chop down a piece of bamboo and walk on the rounded surface to promote strength and vigor, an exercise known as *takefumi*. Because the sole is viewed as the body's "second heart" in Japanese tradition, aging was seen to begin at the feet, and the strength of the sole equated with the strength of the soul, or so the idea goes.

Japan's first modern health pathway was created in the 1980s at the Shiseido Cosmetics Factory in Kakegawa, Japan. It comprises a 250-foot (75-meter) walk around an irregular rectangle and features three large types of gravel set within a flat mortar path, the stimulus beginning softly and gradually becoming stronger. There are bridges of small gravel to stimulate the toes, square stones designed to confront hard-to-reach areas with a strong stimulus, and large square stones with sharp edges laid flat. Small gravel, challenging for the bottoms of toes or areas between the toes, is juxtaposed with rounded concrete bars and stones, effective for the arches and designed to replicate the motion of the traditional health exercise of walking on bamboo, *takefumi*.

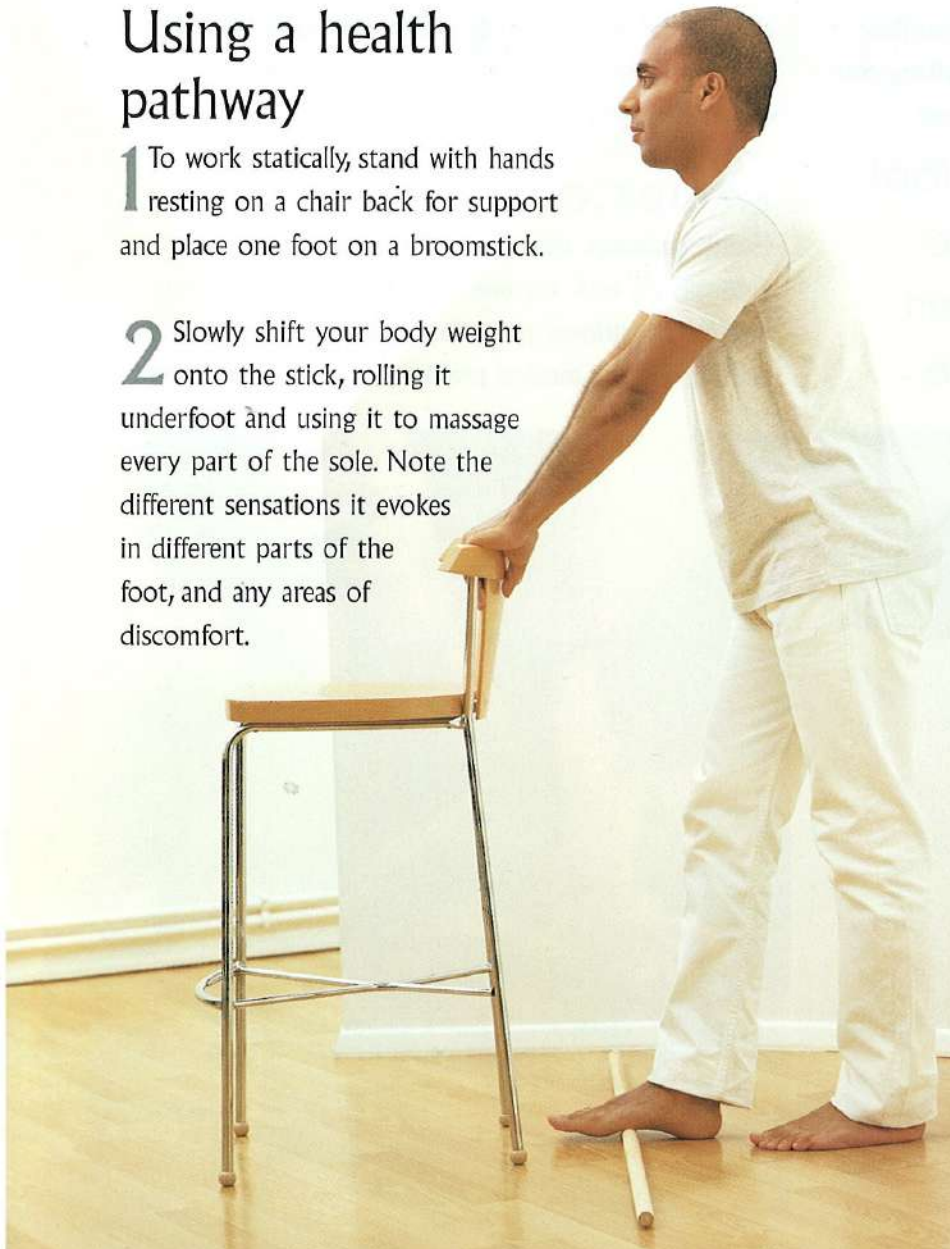
MAKING YOUR OWN PATHWAY

To replicate the effect at home, incorporate some of the ideas set out on pages 48–49 to create your own health pathway, either indoors or in your backyard. Lay a trail of different surface textures to walk over or stand still on. Choose whatever appeals to you, and give yourself the chance to play, trying new items to keep yourself interested and to stimulate your feet in different ways. Choose from the handle of a broom or wooden doweling; crunchy gravel, pebbles, and smooth river rocks; found objects from beach, woodlands, and garden, such as driftwood, a fallen log, or a rounded concrete lawn edger; rounded bamboo or a PVC pipe cut in half; a door mat, sand, and soothing grass. When using outdoor items, be sure they remain stable—bury them in the earth or support them in some other way. Indoors, consider using small, stable objects, or place items in a container or tray: dried peas in a box, rocks in a sock, for example. For support while static, hold on to the back of a chair. Some people like to stand in one

Using a health pathway

1 To work statically, stand with hands resting on a chair back for support and place one foot on a broomstick.

2 Slowly shift your body weight onto the stick, rolling it underfoot and using it to massage every part of the sole. Note the different sensations it evokes in different parts of the foot, and any areas of discomfort.



BENEFITS OF PATHWAYS

- Boosted overall energy levels
- Deep sleep
- Feet that feel fully relaxed
- A sense of strength in the muscles of the foot, legs, abdomen, and lower back

VARIATIONS

If a broomstick seems too painful, try a less challenging object, such as a dowel stick of lesser diameter.

Alternatively, cover the broomstick with a towel before applying pressure to it. After a few sessions you may be able to remove the towel.

If this is still too powerful, start from a seated position, using one foot on top of the other to exert pressure onto the stick and accustom your foot to the rounded surface. Gradually build up to the full standing position in step 1.

place and work with one piece of interesting surface underfoot, while others like to take a hike, walking over a variety of surfaces. The optimal frequency and duration of application should be every day for about 10 minutes, so make sure to choose a variety of experiences you actively enjoy.

These exercises give the foot an opportunity to explore shapes that were once part of its everyday experience.

STARTING OUT

Health pathways are a form of exercise, so start out gradually. As with any exercise, you should consult a medical practitioner prior to proceeding if you have an existing foot or medical problem, such as osteoporosis,

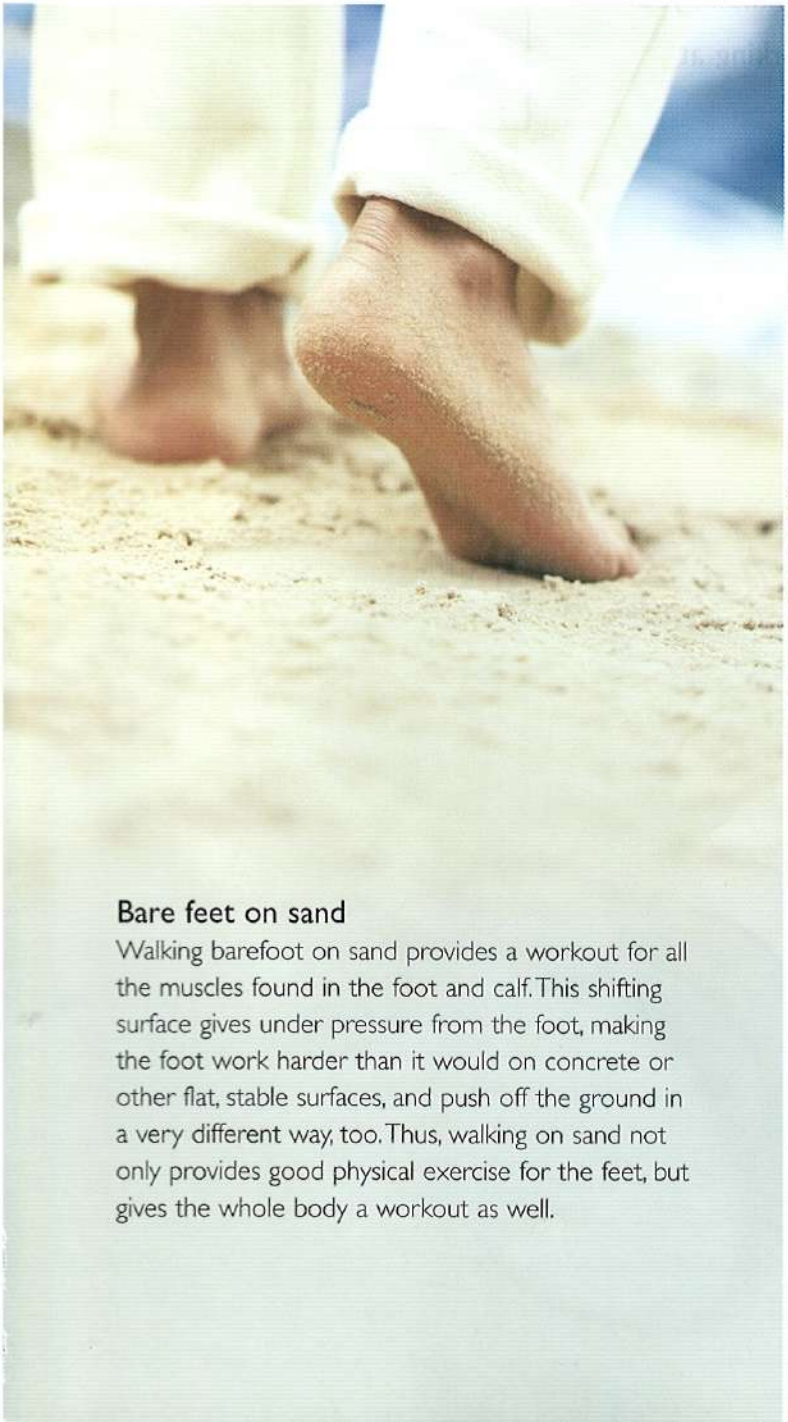
Bare feet on bamboo

Takefumi is the Japanese tradition of walking on bamboo: *take* means "bamboo" and *fumi* "to step upon." Take a length of bamboo cut in half and place it rounded side up on the floor. Stand and place one foot on the bamboo. Slowly shift your body weight onto the surface, noting what you feel and any areas of sensitivity. Your foot should feel pleasantly rather than unpleasantly stressed. Experiment by rocking from side to side, or vary the dimension by working with bamboo (or PVC piping) of different dimensions.

Bare feet on stones

Rocks smoothed by running water can provide a pleasant surface on which to exercise the feet. Experiment by sampling a variety of rocks—you may discover that you have a favorite size and dimension of pebble. You may even find that one rock feels particularly good to one part of the foot, while another stone feels good to another. In addition to applying pressure with a single stone, stand or walk (carefully) in a rocky riverbed to appreciate the invigorating sensation of cool running water.

or any other concerns. Before using a health pathway, remember that any object you step on is a challenge to the foot. Be aware of the effect each texture has on your foot, noting your response and staying within your comfort zone. If you over-challenge your foot, you may make yourself susceptible to injury. If you feel soreness in the foot after walking on a pathway, reduce the challenge by shortening the amount of time you spend on your health pathway or changing to a smaller object. If, after attaining positive results with your first pathway, you wish to step up a level, try adapting the pathway to include more challenging objects and textures to walk over or stand on. Examples of these might include stones with the sharper edges laid flat, or a combination of smaller gradations of gravel to really work the bottoms of the toes and the spaces between them and more rounded objects to manipulate the arches.



Bare feet on sand

Walking barefoot on sand provides a workout for all the muscles found in the foot and calf. This shifting surface gives under pressure from the foot, making the foot work harder than it would on concrete or other flat, stable surfaces, and push off the ground in a very different way, too. Thus, walking on sand not only provides good physical exercise for the feet, but gives the whole body a workout as well.

Bare feet on grass

Stepping on grass can be cool and refreshing, and the soft and springy sole of the foot appreciates its reciprocating soft springiness. Try walking on grass at different times of day—first thing in the morning when moistened by dew; following a rain shower when the ground is sodden; and try it at night, when your sense of sight cannot distract from the sensations underfoot. Appreciate grass in different seasons, too, from a crunchy winter frost to springtime grass warmed by the sun.

SELF-HELP TOOLS

Reflexology tools can help pinpoint the locations of stresses in your feet, hands, and body. They then go one step further to break up or interrupt those stresses. Consider how much time and money you have available. If your financial resources are limited, you can create your own self-help device using household items, such as golf balls. If your time comes at a premium, you can even use your self-help tool discreetly while working at your desk or waiting in line.

LEARNING TIP

Remember that tools are only for self-help and never for application of pressure on someone else. Be aware of your response to the pressure exerted by the hard surface of tools such as foot rollers or golf balls. Choose a level of pressure according to your preference and level of comfort.

Hand and foot self-help tools come in a variety of shapes and sizes. Shown here are some cylindrical foot rollers and a spherical roller for use on either the hands or the feet.

Self-help tools for the feet

Cylindrical objects work best when rolled under the foot. In addition to commercially available products, you can use objects found around the house, including rolling pins, soft-drink bottles, or the rung of a chair. A golf ball is an ideal self-help tool because of its appropriate size and shape.

Cup the golf ball in the palm of your hand, trapping it against your foot. Rest your fingers on the outside edge of your foot. Roll the golf ball through the area.

Place your foot on the roller. Roll your foot along the roller, angling the foot to target different reflex areas. You may increase the pressure by crossing your legs.

Self-help tools for the hands

Using hand tools usually requires little effort, and they are often more discreet and easier to use than foot tools. Golf balls or even small, round dog toys are convenient items for application of pressure.

Target the fingers and thumb by trapping the digit to be worked between the golf ball and the fingers of your other hand. Roll the ball along the entire digit.

Work reflex areas in the heels of the hands by lacing the fingers together. Place the ball between the heels of the hands and roll the ball throughout the area.

To pinpoint an area, cup the golf ball in one hand, holding it in place by resting the fingers of your other hand on top. Roll the golf ball throughout the area.

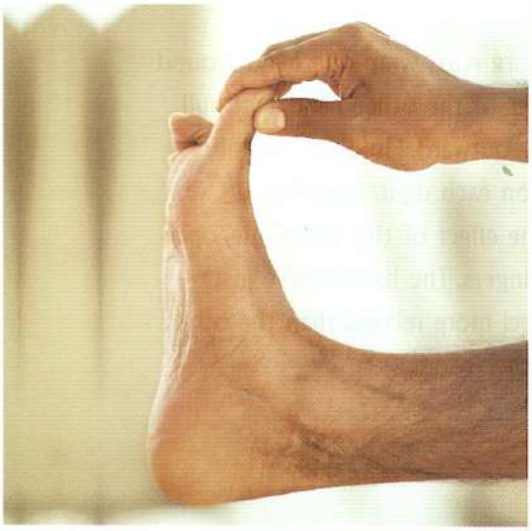
RELAXATION EXERCISES

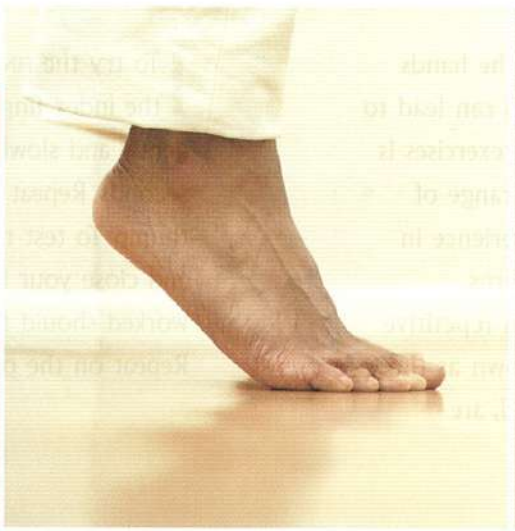
For the feet

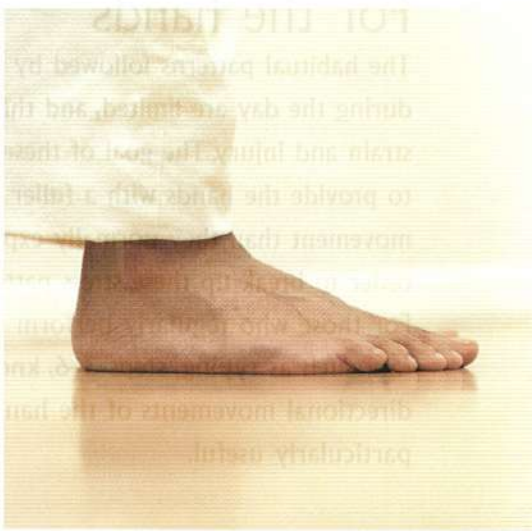
A footstep is made possible by the actions of and interactions between muscles, tendons, and ligaments, but these areas seldom experience their full range of movement during the routine activities of a normal day. To break up your routine and strengthen the foot's structures, try the following exercises.

1 To stretch the main tendon in the calf, try the ACHILLES TENDON STRETCH. Stand facing a wall and place your hands on the wall at shoulder level and rest your head near them. Then bend one knee and place the other leg straight behind you. As you rest in this position for 15–30 seconds, keep your heel on the ground. You should feel a pull in your calf, which is where the Achilles tendon is located. Now change legs and stretch the other calf.

2 The SIDE TO SIDE ROCK recreates the seldom-experienced side to side movement of the foot. To practice, stand with your knees shoulder-width apart, and bend your knees slightly. Now rock from side to side. This is especially good for those with longer second toes or standing occupations to relieve tension in the middle of the foot.







3 TOE STRETCHES can be done while seated. With your foot resting on your knee, grasp your big toe, pulling it gently and slowly to stretch the muscles on the bottom of the foot. Repeat on all toes of both feet.

4 TOE RAISES strengthen the muscles in the bottoms of the feet and the calf. While standing, grasp the back of a chair to balance yourself. Rise onto the balls of the feet, pause, then lower. Repeat several times.

5 While standing or sitting, practice the TOE PRESS by pressing down on the floor with the toes to strengthen the muscles of the toes. Try to imagine pushing your toes down so that they are completely flat on the floor.

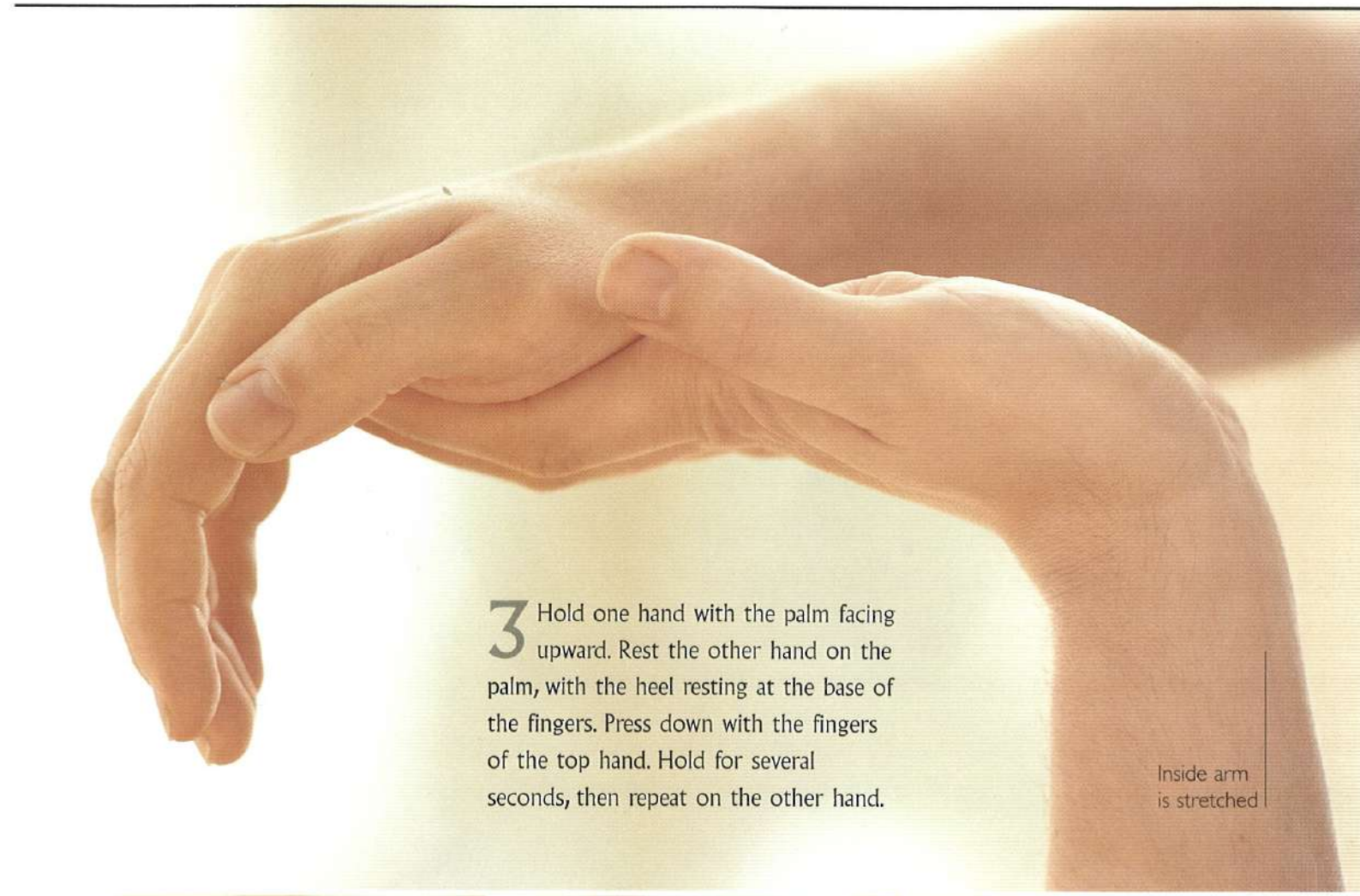
6 The ANKLE ROTATION loosens and stretches foot muscles, and improves circulation to the ankles. First circle the foot in a clockwise direction several times, then repeat the circle in a counter-clockwise direction several times. As you draw a full circle in the air with your big toe, your foot should move through all four directional movements. Now repeat on the other foot.

For the hands

The habitual patterns followed by the hands during the day are limited, and this can lead to strain and injury. The goal of these exercises is to provide the hands with a fuller range of movement than they normally experience in order to break up these stress patterns. For those who regularly perform a repetitive task such as typing, steps 3–6, known as the directional movements of the hand, are particularly useful.

1 To try the FINGER PULL, wrap one hand around the index finger of the other hand, and pull gently and slowly outward. Hold for several seconds. Repeat on each digit, including the thumb. To test the effect of this technique, open and close your fingers. The hand you've just worked should feel more relaxed than the other. Repeat on the other hand.

2 Next, loosen up your palms with the PALM MOVER. Position your hand so that your other fingers now rest on the top of your other hand, while your thumb sits on the surface of the palm. Press down with your fingers while pushing up with your thumb. The movement created is similar to that of wringing your hands. Do this several times and then repeat on the other hand.



3 Hold one hand with the palm facing upward. Rest the other hand on the palm, with the heel resting at the base of the fingers. Press down with the fingers of the top hand. Hold for several seconds, then repeat on the other hand.

Inside arm is stretched

4 Next, rest one hand on top of the other. Press down with the heel of the hand for a few seconds before applying the same exercise on the other hand.

5 Now rest one hand on top of the other. Wrap your fingers around the outside of the hand. Press down with the heel of the top hand, holding the position briefly. Now repeat on your other hand.

6 Finally, with one hand on top of the other, wrap your fingers around the inside of the hand, pressing down with the fingers of the top hand. Hold momentarily and repeat on the other hand.