

Heel implant gave me dancing feet at last

IT MAY sound ironic that podiatrist Emma Supple has never been steady on her feet. Yet it wasn't until she began her training that she discovered why. Emma, 41, who had always had problems walking, had flat feet, a common ailment which is also known as fallen arches and can lead to knee, hip, neck and lower back pain.

"I never won at sports day as a child because I couldn't run very well," says Emma. "I was always going over on my ankles and suffered knee pain. High heels gave me a form of relief as they created an artificial arch that made walking more comfortable."

Flat feet is the result of the small ankle bone that connects foot and leg sliding off its base on the heel bone. Instead of forming part of a tripod-shaped support, evenly dispersing the force of each step as the weight of the body is carried down the leg and through the foot, the ankle bone tilts and rotates. The foot rolls inwards - a condition called hyperpronation - throwing the musculoskeletal system out of kilter.

The effects can be felt in ligaments, muscles and joints (growing pains are often the result of flat feet) but notably in the knees, hips, neck and lower back.

Around 20 per cent of us have a degree of flat feet though without always suffering problems. Corrective insoles or orthotics are usually prescribed to lift arches. Permanent corrective procedures for severe cases sound daunting.

"You can have the heel bone cut and opened up to give you an arch, or realigned with a bolt to keep it in place," explains Emma, from north London.

"Tendons can be lengthened, shortened or even transferred to rebalance the foot. All require hours in theatre, weeks in a cast and months of rehabilitation and physiotherapy. With three young children and a busy practice in London it wasn't an option for me."

Yet as Emma's problems grew she knew corrective surgery was inevitable. "I remember having difficulty walking on a beach as my feet couldn't grip the soft sand. They were no better than flippers."

Bunions and heel spurs were also

Podiatrist Emma Supple had a stent inserted between her ankle and heel bones to correct flat feet, reports JOANI WALSH

developing. "With continued pressure on my joints I'd have ended up with a knee replacement," she says.

Emma found out about an operation in America. HyproCure involves inserting a stent into the sinus tarsi, the small space between ankle and heel bones, under local anaesthetic. The aim is to support the ankle bone and restore normal motion to the foot. The titanium stent, shaped like a cross between a funnel and a screw, was developed by Dr Michael Graham, of Detroit company GraMedica. It is claimed to last a lifetime and can also be removed.

"My youngest patient is four, the oldest is 91," he says. "The magic age to get it sorted is six or seven as the sooner you tackle the root problem, the less damage is done to knees, hip and back. By the time the average person reaches 50 they've clocked up 180million steps. Even if your feet are slightly out of alignment your body will break down somewhere."

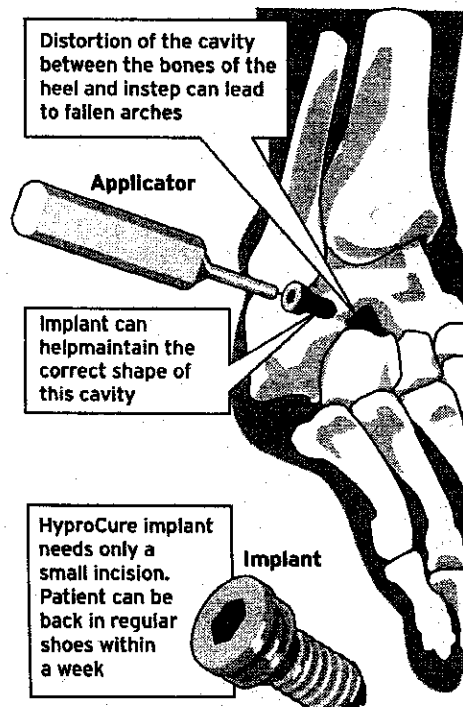
DR GRAHAM believes 50 to 60 per cent of us have flat feet and the condition is hereditary. "Thousands don't realise they are affected," he says. "If your knees are continuously twisted you'll probably develop arthritis and go on to get knee surgery. Yet you still haven't solved the problem. If your leg is being pulled out of the hip joint, the pelvis tilts forward, which means you get herniated discs. You can have all these problems without realising the root problem is flat feet."

Earlier this year Emma flew to the US to have the operation done by Dr Graham. Inserting the stent through a small cut took seven minutes and Emma flew home four days later. Some patients need additional procedures, depending on their problem. "It is done on one foot at a time so the patient continues functioning fairly normally with the other," adds Dr Graham. It costs around £3,000 per foot.

Emma is now looking to have her other foot operated on in the UK. "I'm delighted," she says. "My posture has improved so much. Five weeks after the operation, I danced for three hours."

● To find a surgeon go to www.hyprocure.com, click "locate a doctor near you" and follow the links to a doctor in your area. Or, visit www.feetforlife.org and click on the "find a podiatrist" section and ring around local surgeons.

SEVEN-MINUTE MIRACLE



WALKING TALL: The tiny stent ended a lifetime of pain for Emma

Picture: TIM CLARKE