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IEHA Aching Feet

By Christopher Tricozzi

Do your feet hurt? As a housekeeper you are certainly not alone if you answered yes. Nor is this something new in the housekeeping industry.

All the way back in 1886, *Good Housekeeping Magazine* published an article entitled, "The Feet, How They Should Be Cared For." The article discussed the best footwear for children and also stressed the need for proper footwear and foot care for housekeepers—those working in their own homes or those "employed for wages" in someone else's home, a hotel, or a commercial property.

While the article said that housekeepers should avoid pointed shoes and shoes with overly high heels, it offered few other suggestions for adults to make the best footwear choices. As to treating sore feet, "the nurse who had taken care of a great many sick people" recommended that housekeepers soak their feet regularly in "warm borax water to keep down the inflammation."

These days, it is hoped that no housekeeper reading this article has such troubled and painful feet that they are inflamed and must be soaked in warm water regularly. However, aching feet are a serious issue in the housekeeping industry. According to MyPursuit, an online service that describes scores of occupations and what the jobs typically entail, housekeepers must "have the ability to spend most of their work hours on their feet," and the work time can range anywhere from a few hours to 10 or 12 hours per day.

Fortunately, there are steps housekeepers and housekeeping departments can take to keep feet healthy and pain free. These include everything from selecting shoes to installing antifatigue matting systems in key "back-end" sections of hotels, restaurants, and other hospitality sites as well as areas such as reception and check-in counters, where staff must stand for long periods of time.

“I Still Have My Feet on the Ground, I Just Wear Better Shoes”

Oprah Winfrey said this many years ago as her career in television was taking off. Although the housekeepers reading this article may not be as famous as Oprah, the part of her quote I am most interested in is the “better shoes” comment.

One of my key recommendations is to select shoes that feel good from the start. So many of us try on shoes, whether for work or pleasure, that do not feel all that comfortable in the store, but we assume they will become more comfortable over time.

While it is true that shoes can become more flexible and comfortable after some wear, this happens less frequently than many of us realize. The following are some additional suggestions that should help keep feet healthy, pain free, and safe as well:

- Typically when you are selecting new shoes, the salesperson will ask what size you wear. It is always best to measure your feet each time you purchase new shoes. Feet can change over time, just as with every other part of the anatomy. And for people who are on their feet for long periods every day, it is not uncommon for the feet to actually flatten, which can make a difference in the shoe size.
- When salespeople measure your feet, they will often do so while you are sitting down. This is a mistake. If you are on your feet most of the day, measure them while you are standing. That will provide the most accurate size. And measure both feet. Again, time and age can cause one foot to be slightly larger than the other.
- Make shoe shopping an afternoon or evening event. Feet can stretch during the course of the day. If your workday starts at 9 a.m. and ends about 5 p.m. or 6 p.m., the best time to go shopping for shoes is right after work.
- Always try on both shoes in a pair.
- Walk around in the shoes. Along with feeling comfortable, the shoes must be safe. Do they have a secure grip to the floor? Slips, trips, and falls are often the result of improper shoe selection.
- Don't judge a book by its cover. Many people select shoes based almost exclusively on their appearance. Although this can be an option for a dress shoe

worn only occasionally, when choosing shoes for work, here's the rule: safety first, comfort second, appearance third.

- When trying on shoes for work, wear the type of socks/stockings you wear while on the job. If you try on shoes wearing athletic socks but wear stockings while on duty, this can skew the shoe measurement.

Finally, if selecting shoes for an entire housekeeping department, set up a "shoe challenge." Have some housekeepers wear one type of shoes, another a second type, and a third group still another type of shoe. After two or three weeks, survey the housekeepers regarding comfort, proper grip, and fatigue. Typically, one pair will rise to the top as the most comfortable to wear on the job.

The Fatigue Issue

We just mentioned asking housekeepers if they feel fatigue after wearing work shoes. The fatigue we are concerned about is not simply being tired at the end of the workday. It is pain in the feet, joints, and muscles as a result of standing for long periods of the day.

The right shoes can help alleviate this fatigue to a point. But especially if the housekeeper or hotel employee must be on hard-surface flooring for long periods, shoes can do only so much to help. This is why hotels should install "antifatigue" matting systems wherever possible at workstations, behind counters, and even in janitorial closets.

The benefit of an antifatigue mat is the push, resilience, and bounce it provides. Often in a work setting, blood vessels can become compressed in the feet and legs during the course of the day. The bounce of an antifatigue mat helps increase blood flow through the lower extremities and reduces pain and fatigue.

However, beware. Just as proper shoe selection is a process, the right steps must be taken when choosing antifatigue matting. First, a "soft mat" is not an antifatigue mat. It's just a soft mat that will wear out over time. Second, rental mats typically will not help alleviate pain and fatigue. Look for mats that are engineered to be antifatigue mats. For instance, at least one manufacturer makes antifatigue mats with a patented cushion, specially engineered to reduce pain and fatigue. Typically these mats must be purchased; however, they are cost effective because they are designed not only to reduce fatigue but to be exceedingly durable and long lasting.

Break Time

No discussion of helping to keep feet healthier and pain free is complete without a comment about work breaks. Housekeepers should take numerous short breaks during the course of the workday rather than a couple of long breaks. Studies indicate that frequent short breaks are more helpful.

Although it seems as though taking breaks might negatively impact worker productivity, just the opposite is likely to be true. Proper shoes, antifatigue matting, and frequent breaks help keep housekeepers healthy. And healthy workers, from the feet up, tend to be the most productive.

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About Crown Mats and Matting

For more than 60 years, Crown Mats and Matting has been a pioneer in the development and manufacture of matting products. Beginning with the invention of walk-off matting by the company's founder, R.P. Johnson, the company now has the most diverse matting product line offered in our industry. Crown sells matting through an extensive network of highly trained sales representatives throughout the United States and worldwide. These sales experts are familiar with the features and benefits of all matting systems and are able to help their clients find the right system for virtually any application.

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