

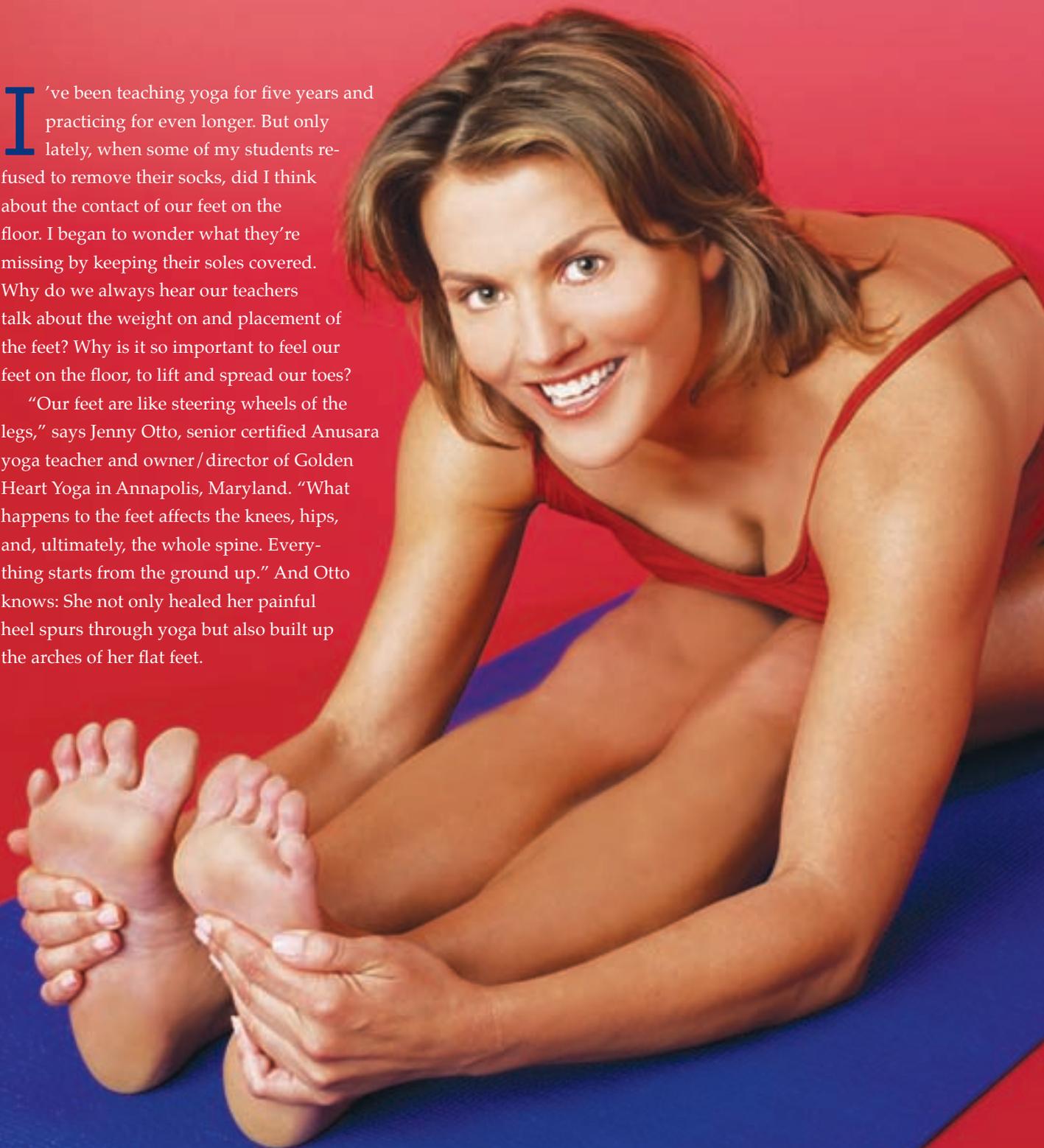
Happy Feet

Your lowest extremities provide your foundation and, when in optimal alignment, can step up your practice and even your stride

by Jennifer Lang

I've been teaching yoga for five years and practicing for even longer. But only lately, when some of my students refused to remove their socks, did I think about the contact of our feet on the floor. I began to wonder what they're missing by keeping their soles covered. Why do we always hear our teachers talk about the weight on and placement of the feet? Why is it so important to feel our feet on the floor, to lift and spread our toes?

"Our feet are like steering wheels of the legs," says Jenny Otto, senior certified Anusara yoga teacher and owner/director of Golden Heart Yoga in Annapolis, Maryland. "What happens to the feet affects the knees, hips, and, ultimately, the whole spine. Everything starts from the ground up." And Otto knows: She not only healed her painful heel spurs through yoga but also built up the arches of her flat feet.



From a purely podiatric point of view, the human foot is rich with sensory nerve endings, says Dr. Robert A. Kornfeld, founder and owner of Holistic and Complementary Podiatric Medicine in Lake Success, New York. That network of nerve endings tells the brain exactly where the foot is in space and on the ground. "In so doing, all the muscles of the lower extremity involved in the gait cycle can function toward the goal of propulsion in the correct sequence," says Dr. Kornfeld. "So, feeling our feet on the floor and being able to isolate and lift the toes enhances the sensory feedback to the brain and enables a more efficient flow when we're walking."

THE FOOT-YOGA CONNECTION

It's key to wake up our feet in yoga because their role in poses—whether standing, balancing, sitting, or inverting—is crucial. "They're the essential tool to align the rest of the body," says Dr. Kornfeld, a yoga practitioner of 22 years. "If they're not in proper alignment, the rest of the pose will suffer." That means to bear equal weight on all four corners of the foot—big-toe mound to pinky-toe mound, inner ankle to outer ankle—and to make sure the second toe sits directly in front of the ankle. Good alignment here will decrease the forces of stress that the feet, legs, pelvis, and back must absorb during activity, which will reduce the likelihood of injury or disease over time.

In the language of Anusara yoga, which both Dr. Kornfeld and Otto practice, the feet are the cornerstones of muscular energy, which means drawing inward to deepen the pose. "Muscular energy is the contraction force of a muscle on bone," says Dr. Kornfeld. "It's inward energy and enlivens the core. Organic energy refers to the expansion, the shining out of outward energy for maximum deepening and energizing of the pose."

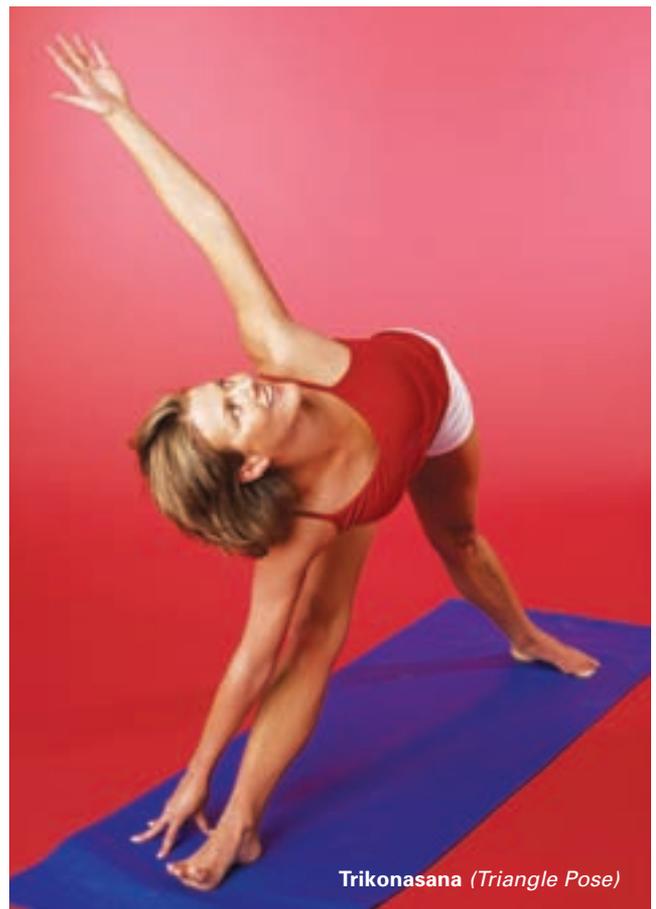
The purpose of the feet is the same in every pose, says Otto. "You can't create extension without equal and opposite force of gravity," she says. "It's a basic law of physics: There must be grounding to create a lift in gravity."

IN STANDING POSES:

The feet serve to balance the body, says Dr. Kornfeld. But there's more to it than that. "They guide our knees and hips, acting as an anchor to earth," says Otto. As we press down through the four corners, the arches, which comprise sling muscles (tibialis anterior and fibularis longus), help draw energy up and into the body and communicate with the pelvis and lower-back muscles. When you use your feet correctly and distribute your weight

evenly, the rest of your body responds energetically. If your weight is unevenly distributed, you'll compensate somewhere else, inevitably causing strain and tension in your body.

• **In Trikonasana (Triangle Pose)**, it's common for students not to ground well enough on the big-toe mound and inner heel, which connects myofascial, or connective tissue, to the groin and pelvis. If the weight is more on the outer edge of your feet, you disconnect your legs from your core stability muscles in your trunk. "Core stability muscles maintain posture," says Otto. It's important to use these deep muscles to their fullest to maintain the natural curvatures of the spine during all other movements of the body. "Disconnecting from the core stability muscles re-



creates other less stabilizing muscles to do the work, and this creates an imbalance between the deeper muscles and the more superficial ones," she says. The result is that when the superficial muscles take on the responsibility to stabilize, the deeper muscles weaken.

• **In Adho Mukha Svanasana (Downward Facing Dog)**, students tend to press through the outer edges of their feet rather than extend through the balls of both the big-toe mound and the little-toe mound. If there's too much weight

on the outer foot, the inside of the legs disconnects from the pelvis, and the legs don't communicate with the torso. This means the outer body (read: superficial muscles) works harder, resulting in a weaker inner body, or little inner-core strength and support. If you use your feet well, the force of gravity stays in your legs, where the bigger muscles are, thus giving freedom to your spine, says Otto. Without that extension, the force of gravity goes into your lumbar spine or lower back, causing stress and strain.

IN BALANCING POSES:

If you don't extend well and equally through the four corners of the feet, the force of gravity goes into the torso, and your trunk will take over the work of the legs. Rather than creating freedom and space in an already compact body, you reduce the space and create more tension, says Otto.

- **In Vrksasana (Tree Pose)**, one of the goals is to build strength, and the reward for having strong legs is being able to balance. To achieve this balance, you need to root down through both the outer and inner heel of the standing leg, which helps stabilize the ankle. While your ankle will still move, the movement will become contained, says Otto. She suggests standing at a wall to practice equal grounding through your feet rather than standing in the center of the room and not using your feet properly. "Equal pressure between the leg and foot of the bent leg connects the circuit for the nervous system," says Otto. "Organically extending from the center of the pelvis will complete the balance so you can dance within the midline."

- **In Virabhadrasana III (Warrior III)**, you need to extend equal and opposite force through both legs and through your arms. Otto teaches this with a prop: With your arms stretched out in front of you, hold a belt or strap in your hands and try to pull it apart. As you extend one leg back and pull on the strap in front of you, your deep core muscles will draw into your midline to help you find the balance. "The idea is to keep the force of gravity in the legs so the larger muscles and bones are working rather than the spines and organs," says Otto.



Virabhadrasana III
(Warrior III Pose) with strap

If you don't extend equally through the four corners of your feet, the force of gravity goes into your torso, and your trunk will take over the work of your legs.

IN SEATED POSES:

As you extend through the four corners of your feet, all four sides of your legs will engage and connect to your pelvis, which helps put your femur in your hip socket and create connection into your spinal muscles for strength and stability.

- **In Dandasana (Staff Pose)**, sit facing the wall with your legs in front of you. Lift and spread your toes to engage your muscles as you press your feet into the wall. You may notice that the equal pressure through your feet lengthens your spine, making it easier to sit tall.

- **In Gomukhasana (Cow Face Pose)**, if you cross your legs without extending through the four corners of your feet, as is common, you will put strain on your knees and disconnect your legs from your pelvis. It's also typical for the outside of your feet to sickle or turn out, which can also hurt your knees. Try to lift your knees, draw the femur into your hip socket, and press your feet into your hands for resistance to create a container of stability as you lengthen your spine out of your pelvis. "It's like trying to pull a rope on a sailboat to set the sail," says Otto. "Unless the rope is anchored at one end, you won't be able to pull the sail up." The bottom line is you can't have opening without the stability.

FIVE WAYS TO WAKE UP YOUR FEET

Senior certified Anusara teacher Jenny Otto suggests the following exercises to enliven your step in both practice and life. Bare feet will increase your contact with the ground force.

* Sitting or standing, place a tennis ball under one foot. Roll it back and forth—from the ball of your foot to your heel—for a couple of minutes to massage your sole. Remove the ball and stand up. Your foot will feel more open, looser, and have more circulation. Because of the myofascial connection, that same side of your body will feel more relaxed, and you might have better balance.

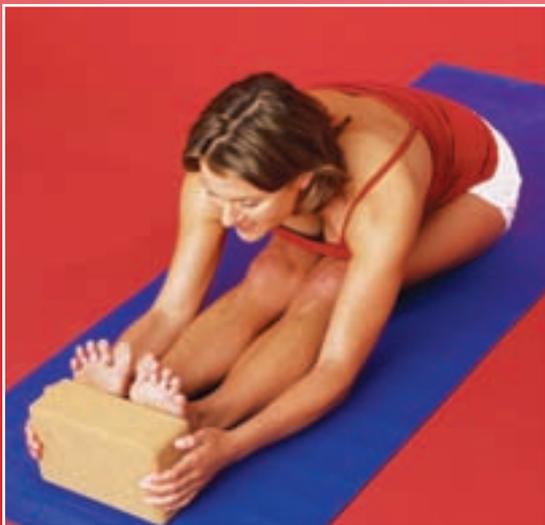
* Sitting or standing, put a tennis ball under the center of your heel. Extend your arms up, and lean to the opposite side. This stretches the back of your body (calves, hamstrings, buttocks, muscles of the spine up to the neck). Change sides and repeat for a couple of breaths; step off the ball and notice new length in your side and back body. Compare sides: one will feel open, the other compressed.

The breath will be fuller on the side just stretched.

* Sitting or standing, put a tennis ball under the ball of one foot. First, curl your toes around it, then lift and spread them, keeping them on the ball. This will open and stretch both the front of your foot and the front of your body (shins, thighs, chest, neck). Change sides and repeat for a couple of breaths. Step off the ball, and notice new length in the front body. Compare sides: one will feel longer, the other shorter.

* Sit with your legs out in front of you and interlace your fingers between your toes. Then, make a fist with your foot. Wiggle the toes back and forth to create space between them. Change sides and repeat for a couple of breaths. Stand up and compare sides to see which one feels more open.

* Sit on the floor and place your palms behind the big and little toe sides of each foot with your fingers pointing down. Wiggle your feet back and forth, side to side. This helps your feet stay flexible and stabilizes your gait; if your feet are stiff, you'll develop a compensation, which can cause tension and eventually lead to injury, affecting the hips and back as well as your gait.



Dandasana (Staff Pose)
with a block

IN INVERSIONS:

You might think your feet don't matter as much if you're upside-down and not using them for foundational support. Wrong! If you don't extend equally through your feet, the force of gravity will drop into your spine and neck. And to balance in inversions like Sirsasana (Headstand), Adho Mukha Vrksasana (Handstand), or Pinca Mayurasana (Forearm Stand), you need to tap into the energy of your extended feet.

- **In Sarvangasana (Shoulder Stand)**, many people reach up through their legs unevenly so the little-toe side is higher than the big-toe side. "This happens because the inside of the foot is weaker than the outside," says Otto. "But be careful because it creates a collapse into the pelvic floor." When you're balanced and extending through your feet evenly, you give an energetic lift to your spine.

- **In Sirsasana (Headstand)**, you have two end points—your skull on the floor and your feet in the air. Reaching through your feet creates an opposing force so your skull can lift away from the floor and avoid collapsing into your spine and neck. 🧘

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