



Foot Exercises

The Foot Exercises allow you to release and gain control of the muscles in your feet, ankles, calves, and shins. The exercises are practiced sitting up, using the hands to provide resistance as you flex (dorsiflex) and extend (plantar flex) your ankle. These exercises help to relieve foot cramps, plantar fasciitis, Achilles tendinitis, tibialis anterior tendinitis, and ankle problems.

EXERCISE DESCRIPTION

Starting Position: Sit on the floor or in a chair – whichever is most comfortable for you. Rest your right ankle on your left thigh, and let your right knee fall out to the side.

Movement: Wrap your right hand underneath the toes and ball of your right foot. Your hand and your foot will be working against each other in this movement, and your hand will always win in the end. Press the ball of your right foot into your right hand, extending your ankle, and gently resist with your hand. Then as slowly and as gently as you can, start releasing the pressing of your foot, so that your foot is very slowly letting your hand win. Your right hand and arm should be working to pull your foot into a flexed position, while your foot resists. When your foot is completely released, just relax. Repeat this movement one or two more times, releasing as slowly and with as much control as you can.

Now, place your left hand on the top of your right foot. Flex your right foot, bringing your toes closer to your knees, and pressing the top of your foot into your left hand. Flex as far as you can comfortably, then start resisting with your left hand. Then as slowly and with as much control as you can, start releasing the flexing of your foot, gradually allowing your left hand to push your foot toward a neutral position. Your foot is resisting your hand, and your hand is very slowly winning. When your foot has reached a neutral position, just relax. You can repeat this movement one or two more times.

When you're done, practice these movements with your left foot.

ANATOMY OF THE FOOT EXERCISES

The Foot Exercises release the following muscles that plantar flex the ankle:

Gastrocnemius

Soleus

Tibialis posterior

*There are other muscles that assist in plantar flexion

And the muscles that dorsiflex the ankle:

Tibialis anterior

Extensor digitorum longus

Extensor hallucis longus

Muscles that flex and extend the toes are also released by the Foot Exercises; refer to *Trail Guide to the Body* for a complete list.

CONDITIONS HELPED BY THE FOOT EXERCISES

The Foot Exercises help to alleviate the following conditions:

Foot cramps

Plantar fasciitis

Achilles tendinitis

Tibialis anterior tendinitis

Ankle problems

HOW TO TEACH THE FOOT EXERCISES

Get the student in their starting position. Your student can sit on the floor or in a chair – whatever is most comfortable for them. They should rest their right ankle on their left thigh, and let their right knee fall out to the side.

Teach the exercise. Instruct your student to wrap their right hand underneath the toes and ball of their right foot. In this movement, you are teaching them to be their own hands-on practitioner. Tell your student that their hand and their foot will be gently working against each other in this movement, and their hand will always win in the end. Instruct your student to press the ball of their right foot into their right hand, extending their ankle. They should gently resist this pressure with their right hand. Now they can slowly and gently start releasing the pressing of their right foot. Their right hand and arm are working to pull their foot into a flexed position, while the foot

resists. The right hand very slowly wins this gentle battle. When the foot and ankle are completely released, the student can relax. You can talk your student through this movement one or two more times. Try counting to eight or longer to make sure they're releasing slowly enough.

Watch to see if the student engages their dorsiflexors as they release; if they do, you'll see the tibialis anterior tendon pop out on the front of their ankle. This should be avoided so that the student can get maximum benefit from the movement. As long as the student keeps pressing their foot into their hand until they are completely released, then they should not be engaging their dorsiflexors.

Next, instruct your student to place their left hand on top of their right foot. Tell them to flex their ankle, bringing their toes closer to their knees, and pressing the top of their foot into their left hand. The student should flex as far as they can comfortably, and then resist with their left hand. Now they can slowly and gently start releasing the flexing of their ankle. Their left hand and arm are working to pull their foot and ankle into an extended (plantar flexed) position, while the foot resists. The left hand very slowly wins this gentle battle. When the foot and ankle are completely extended and released, the student can relax. You can talk your student through this movement one or two more times. Try counting to eight or longer to make sure they're releasing slowly enough.

Then talk your student through these movements with their left foot.

Notes:

When you first teach this exercise, take the time to make sure your student understands how to use their hand to resist their foot. Their foot and hand should first meet with equal pressure. Then, the student backs off a little bit with their foot; their foot is still resisting their hand, just not quite as much, so the hand is able to slowly move the foot and ankle into the opposite position. The foot should resist the hand up until the very end, just as we resist gravity up until the very end of a typical self-pandiculation.

As I demonstrate in the teaching video, the student can pandiculate the flexion and extension of their toes in a similar manner. If you teach your student how to do this, make sure that they are releasing slowly enough, and make sure they understand how to effectively resist the release with their hand.

Common mistakes:

There is a very common tendency to rush through these movements. To ensure that your student is releasing slowly enough, try counting to eight (or more!) as they release, and encourage them to count for themselves sometimes when practicing on their own.

It is common for people to engage their dorsiflexors to help in the release out of plantar flexion (the first part of this exercise). This should be avoided so that the student can get maximum benefit from the exercise. If your student engages their dorsiflexors, you'll see their tibialis anterior tendon pop out on the front of their ankle. Encourage your student to focus on very slowly releasing and continuing to press their foot against their hand the entire time, until the very end; this will help them to avoid engaging their dorsiflexors.

The following is an example of how I teach the Foot Exercises:

For these foot exercises, you can sit on the floor or in a chair – whatever is most comfortable for you. Bend your right knee and let it fall out to the side, and rest your right ankle on your left thigh. Wrap your right hand underneath the toes and ball of your right foot. Your hand and your foot will be working against each other in this movement, and your hand will always win in the end. Press the ball of your right foot into your right hand, extending your ankle, and gently resist with your hand. Now, as slowly and as gently as you can, start releasing the pressing of your foot, so that your foot is very, very slowly letting your hand win. Your right hand and arm should be working to pull your foot into a flexed position, while your foot resists.

When your foot is completely released, just relax. Repeat this movement one or two more times, releasing as slowly and with as much control as you can. You can count to eight or more as you release to make sure you're releasing slowly enough.

While you're in this position with your right ankle resting on your left thigh, you can do the opposite of that movement. Place your left hand on the top of your right foot. Flex your right foot, bringing your toes closer to your knees, and pressing the top of your foot into your left hand. Flex as far as you can comfortably, then start resisting with your left hand. Now, as slowly and with as much control as you can, start releasing the flexing of your foot, gradually allowing your left hand to push your foot toward a neutral position. Your foot is resisting your hand, and your hand is very slowly winning.

When your foot has reached a neutral position, just relax. You can repeat this movement one or two more times.

(Teach the exercises with the left foot.)