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- [Home](#)
- [Front](#)
- [Canada](#)
- [World](#)
- [Opinion](#)
- [Letters](#)
- [Insight](#)
- [Local](#)
- [Obituaries](#)
- [Life](#)
- [Arts](#)
- [Sports](#)
- [Business](#)
- [Classified](#)
- [Todays pages \(PDF\)](#)

Weekly Sections

- [Etc.](#)
- [Books](#)
- [Faith](#)
- [Homes](#)
- [Travel](#)
- [Wheels](#)

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in Life

Making sense of orthotics

Got foot pain? There's help for you but do your research, experts advise

JOHANNA WEIDNER

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Kim Gibbons didn't know foot orthotics could vary widely in quality until she got a bad pair. The difference was apparent immediately.

"I put them in my shoes and instant pain. Excruciating," recalled the Kitchener woman.

They didn't get better, and Gibbons learned the tough way that not all orthotics, and not all orthotic providers, are created equal.

As these devices have grown in popularity as a remedy to a range of foot problems, so too have the number of people providing them. The products themselves are not regulated by the province, though some of the professionals providing them are.

That means it's really up to patients to educate themselves about orthotics to get quality ones.

"Make sure you go to someone



DAVID BEBEE, RECORD STAFF
Certified orthotist Greg Goff applies plaster while modifying a cast inside the laboratory of Orthopedic Bracing Solutions in Kitchener.



DAVID BEBEE, RECORD STAFF
Kim Gibbons is examined by pedorthist Kim Rau.

who's qualified," warned Kitchener pedorthist Kim Rau.

A few professionals are trained specifically and extensively in making foot orthoses, or orthotics as they're most commonly known.

Pedorthists, podiatrists and chiropodists specialize in foot care including orthoses, while orthotists focus on making orthoses for the whole body, including the feet. Other health care professionals, too, may also provide orthotics, such as chiropractors and physiotherapists. And orthotics are also sold outside of medical offices at trade shows, mall kiosks, shoe stores and online.

Before trying anything or seeing anyone for orthotics, it's wise to visit a physician to discuss the problem, Rau said.

"They're your director of care," Rau said.

Physicians can provide a diagnosis and order tests, if needed, to rule out serious problems. They can also provide a referral to an appropriate professional to treat the problem.

Gibbons went to her physician because of unbearable pain in her feet.

"It's like walking on broken glass," she said. "Getting relief for me was very, very important."

The diagnosis was plantar fasciitis, a condition caused by irritation and inflammation of the tissue. Her physician referred her to a pedorthist, who created custom orthotics for Gibbons. It was designed to prevent further damage and provide relief, although this would take a while because her feet required time to heal.



DAVID BEBEE, RECORD STAFF
Pedorthist Kim Rau makes a custom adjustment to a foot orthotic with a grinder for specific needs of the patient.



DAVID BEBEE, RECORD STAFF
Here's an example of a "bad orthotic" that was not made from a cast to specifically match a patient's foot.



DAVID BEBEE, RECORD STAFF
This is a "good orthotic," made from a cast so it matches the shape of the foot exactly, according to pedorthist Kim Rau.



DAVID BEBEE, RECORD STAFF
Pedorthist Kim Rau fits Kim Gibbons' foot with an orthotic at her Kitchener office.

Gibbons was also seeing a chiropractor and a physiotherapist for back pain connected to her foot condition. The physiotherapist suggested Gibbons try another pair of orthotics because it was important to get a different opinion and product.

"I was still in a lot of pain, so I thought there was something to that," said Gibbons, who was having trouble walking.

A staff member at the physiotherapist's office measured Gibbons' feet with a computerized foot print rather than casting, and a week later she returned to get the orthotics.

Unlike the pair from the pedorthist which felt comfortable from the beginning, this new pair was instantly painful. Gibbons tried walking on them for short periods for a couple of days, customary to break in orthotics, but they were still causing pain.

Gibbons' plantar fasciitis was complicated by high arches, and the new orthotics didn't match the shape of her foot's arch. After more measurements and adjustments to the second orthotics without any improvement, Gibbons returned to her pedorthist. Slowly the orthotics provided by the pedorthist helped, and now her feet no longer hurt.

Gibbons' advice to other people going for orthotics: Do your homework.

"Research it," she said. "Make sure you know what you're getting into."

Make sure a mould is taken of your foot, she said, and learn about orthotics so you know what's to be expected, and that you're getting the best care possible.

Both chiropody and podiatry are professions regulated by the Ministry of Health, which means they must follow rules and regulations about what they do.

Pedorthists and orthotists are certified and regulated by national bodies that enforce standards of practice and quality.

Professions governed by a provincial or national body give the public an avenue for complaints, and can be disciplined.

While professionals in the field might disagree about whether foot orthotics should be regulated or by whom, they agree it's crucial that people providing orthotics should have proper training.

"There's a lot to learn about feet," said Waterloo chiropodist Stephen Hartman.

Learning how to assess is a crucial part of training, so it takes years to become a foot care expert.

Assessment means not only figuring out what orthotic is required, but if it's even needed.

"Not everybody needs a custom-made orthotic right away," Hartman said.

Many things can be tried to alleviate foot problems before resorting to

orthotics.

Good shoes go a long way, or even a cheap over-the-counter cushioning insole or customized insoles. Exercise and physiotherapy can help sore feet too.

Kitchener orthotist Allan Moore agrees it's unwise to go for orthotics if something else can offer relief.

"Never brace first," he said.

Basically, orthotics artificially augment the body and affect how it works. This has repercussions throughout the body and should only be done if necessary. Orthotics are beneficial if they're prescribed properly and there's a need, Moore said.

They're costly (on average \$400 to \$600) and not covered by the Ontario Health Insurance Plan.

Many employee insurance plans cover them, however, some specify the orthotics must be prescribed by certain professions, or even how and where the devices must be made.

Bad orthotics can cause pain by stressing muscles, bones and joints, although it rarely leads to permanent damage.

Luckily, trouble caused by poor quality devices is usually averted "because people simply stop wearing it," Hartman said.

That's what Gibbons did, before going back to her pedorthist to get a proper-fitting pair that remedied her foot problem.

"I'm pain-free now, but I don't go without my orthotics," she said.

And she's sticking with the specialist who helped her get there.

"I'm staying with someone who's always looked after me."

She learned the adage applies when it comes to orthotics, and it's a warning uttered by many professionals in the growing field.

"It's buyer beware," confirmed Moore.

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WHAT TO EXPECT WHEN GETTING FOOT ORTHOTICS

YOUR FIRST VISIT

After discussing it with your physician, an assessment is the first step to orthotics, and a comprehensive one should take at least half an hour.

The provider should collect a history of injuries, as well as lifestyle, then do a physical examination.

Next comes casting the feet.

Only by getting a 3-D model of the foot is it possible to create a custom orthotic that fits unique contours exactly.

This can be done with a few techniques, including a plaster wrap, foam impression, contact digitizing or laser scan.

Not just the feet are important in an initial assessment.

Posture and gait should also be checked, as well as the lower limbs for structure, strength, range of motion and abnormalities.

Footwear should also be evaluated for wear patterns, which give vital clues.

Treatment options and what improvements can be expected should also be explained.

THE FITTING

When the device is ready, usually in a week or more, you'll return for a fitting.

You should be told to bring in a range of shoes in which to try the orthotics, which can be the full length of the shoe or three-quarters of its size.

The professional will watch you walk with the orthotics to check for any problems. How it feels is an important test because comfort is crucial for an effective orthotic.

All feet are unique and react differently.

While some people have no trouble adjusting, others with sensitive feet can experience pain; even just a millimetre adjustment can make a big difference.

Education is also important. The provider should explain exactly how to care for and break in the orthotics. He or she should also give you an idea of how long they will last.

Explaining appropriate footwear is also a must. Orthotics can only work as well as the shoes they're in.

THE FOLLOWUP

People should try new orthoses for two or three weeks.

Either an in-person visit or phone call should be made to ensure the orthotics are fitted well.

If they're still uncomfortable, adjustments can be made or new ones fashioned.

ASK QUESTIONS

Don't hesitate to ask questions when getting foot orthotics, including:

The provider's qualifications and membership in a professional group.

Warranties for the orthotics.

Any associated costs for followup visits.

Where the devices are made, by whom and how.

ORTHOTICS CONSTRUCTION

Orthotics are crafted with layers of different material to provide varying support and cushioning to the foot.

Only orthotics constructed from scratch from your mould are custom-made.

A modified, prefabricated insert is not considered custom-made.

Foot orthotics can be provided by several professions whose training and expertise in foot care varies.

The professionals most highly trained in foot care and orthotics through years of study that includes practical work are pedorthists, podiatrists, orthotists and chiropodists.

Here's a brief explanation of their expertise and training:

CHIROPODIST

Area: The foot.

Expertise: Assessing, treating and preventing foot disorders and disease with therapeutic, orthotic and palliative care.

Education: Undergraduate university degree (high school until this year) and a three-year college diploma in chiropody.

Find out more from the College of Chiropodists of Ontario at <http://www.cocoo.on.ca/> which is for both chiropodists and podiatrists.

ORTHOTIST

Area: The whole body.

Expertise: Designing, making and fitting of orthoses for all parts of the body to restore mobility and to prevent or limit disability.

Education: Undergraduate university degree in a related field such as kinesiology, engineering, physical education or science, and a two-year college diploma in prosthetics and orthotics followed by an internship in one specialty.

Find out more from the Canadian Association for Prosthetics and Orthotics at <http://www.pando.ca/>

PEDORTHIST

Area: Feet and lower limb.

Expertise: The assessment and manufacture of foot appliances and footwear to alleviate painful conditions or correct abnormalities.

Education: Undergraduate university degree in a related field, such as kinesiology, and a 12-month program in pedorthics or a two- to three-year apprenticeship.

Find out more from the Pedorthic Association of Canada at <http://www.pedorthic.ca/>

PODIATRIST

Area: The foot.

Expertise: Diagnosis, treatment and prevention of foot disorders by mechanical, medical and surgical treatment.

Education: Undergraduate university degree in science, and a four-year college program in podiatric medicine.

Find out more from the Canadian Podiatric Medical Association at <http://www.podiatrycanada.org/>



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