

Feet First

Without healthy feet, you're a sitting MMA duck

Imagine you've landed punch after quality punch then suddenly you go for your kick—and your feet aren't there. Technically they are, but every land comes up lame. Your toes curl in fear at every roundhouse. Your shin buckles. Bottom line, without your feet, you're not a fighter. So how do you protect your tootsies all the way to titles? Ahead, we dive feet first.

Deal With It

Dr. Mark Drucker, a San Rafael, California-based podiatrist, says anytime you're barefoot you open yourself up to injuries. In other words, it isn't a matter of if but when. "If something swells up or turns black and blue then it needs to be looked at," Drucker says. "If you feel something in your foot pop or give way, ignoring it will make it many times worse. It's also vital to get checked regularly for osteoporosis. If you have repeated injuries to anything, you will pay for it that way eventually." One way to lessen the blow, however, is to treat your feet well when not fighting, right down to your footwear. "Good running shoes with support can at least give you some relief in your everyday hours," Drucker says. "Don't settle for old soles."

San Jose, California-based MMA instructor Sifu Christian Smith knows firsthand what foot pain can do. "I was grappling in a tournament and rolled over on my foot," he says. "I broke the last two bones above my arch." That was 2004 and the pain hasn't ever fully gone away. If he didn't look after it, he can only imagine how bad it would be. "Taping your feet is a must when you have an injury like this," he says. Smith is also a big believer in the hot and cold method, soaking in hot water for 5-10 minutes then icy cold for the same duration. "By going back and forth, it opens up and closes everything for healing," he says. San Diego-based MMA trainer Dave Nielsen subscribes to strictly cold—with one caveat: "I do believe in the 24-hour period after a foot injury being crucial. You can get many injuries, ice the crap out of it that first day and then not notice the pain ever again. Or don't do it and they can nag you for months and even years. I firmly believe inflammation can stay once it takes hold."

Smith agrees with Drucker on footwear, having found relief in training with wrestling shoes then taking them off to kick a heavy bag to build up calluses. "You need to toughen up your feet if they're going to withstand punishment over time," he exhorts. San Diego-based MMA instructor Dave Nielsen also conditions the skin from repeated kicking. "The calluses need to be on your subdermis—the underlayer—to get thicker on the shin for improvement," Nielsen explains. "Bones improve when you're training, too. You cause microfractures and, as they heal, they strengthen that bone to withstand punishment."

Put Your Best Kick Forward

Smith says ways to minimize foot injuries to begin with are not pointing your toes when you kick or put them underneath when you grapple where they can get rolled over on. “It’s very easy to get lazy with these two points,” Smith says. “But it just takes one unfortunate moment to never forget the mistake.” Nielsen says people also don’t kick in the right range and end up hyperextending. The proper range is just outside of arm’s reach, about six inches further, he says. Plus, you want to strike with your shin and not your foot.

Bottom line, Smith has seen too many fighters not focus on their feet and have it cost them in matches and health. “You can kick your way out of anything,” Smith says. “When you don’t watch out for your feet, you’re defenseless.”

Sidebar

Toughen The Two A’s: Arch and Ankle

Nielsen says you can condition your arch and ankle to avoid injuries with the following exercises:

Sand Runs—“We usually do 2-3 mile runs and then do 10 sprints for 20 seconds each,” he says. “

Sand Barefoot Sprints—“10 50-yard sprints do the job. Don’t do that your first day, though, or you’ll blister...The sand is great because of its uneven surface.”

Calf Raises—If the beach isn’t nearby, calf raises with a heel drop also help as long as you go below parallel.