

The Role of Prefabricated Orthotics in Podiatry Today

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Podiatry has changed quite a bit in the last 10-15 years. Managed care has squeezed reimbursement rates. Patients are divided among insured and uninsured. Medical information is readily available. Podiatrists are faced with these trends every day, striving to practice medicine responsibly while balancing the conflicting demands of insurers, patients, profits and quality of care.

In this context, it's appropriate to re-examine the appropriate use of orthotic devices – and particularly affordable, prefabricated orthotics. Orthotic therapy is the primary therapy for numerous conditions, such as plantar fasciitis, heel spurs, metatarsalgia and Achilles tendonitis. Custom orthotics empower the podiatrist to deliver the precise biomechanical features needed to correct these ailments. While every podiatrist would agree that custom orthotics are the “gold standard” in the ideal world, prefabricated orthotics have an important role in today's demanding environment.

Effective, Improved Therapy

A rarely-discussed reality is that there are prefabs today which are far better than in years past. No longer does a podiatrist have to shudder thinking that the only alternative is flimsy drugstore insoles. One example of a more advanced, professionally-marketed device is Powerstep, which is designed based on podiatric principles. The Powerstep's heel cup and rigid interior support reduces excessive pronation and supports the medial arch, all while keeping the device thin enough to fit. With effective options available like these, surveys suggest that 60% or more of practicing podiatrists dispense prefabricated orthotics today. So when and why should you use them?

- **More Affordable Therapy - *for patients who can't afford or won't pay for custom.*** Over 40 million patients lack health insurance, and millions others have limited or no reimbursement for orthotics. Thus, prefabricated orthotics provide an affordable solution – and a recurring revenue stream to cover the scheduling, evaluating and set up costs of new uninsured patients.
- **First Line Therapy - *for mild-to-moderate conditions.*** Podiatrists regularly run across first-time patients with mild and infrequent pain, or patients seeking nail, corn or other therapy who, when asked, admit to sore or tired feet. These patients would bristle at \$300 custom orthotics if their condition doesn't justify it.
- **Pre-Custom Therapy - *for better diagnosis.*** A good prefabricated orthotic can be effective diagnostically to determine if improved biomechanics relieves pain, such as when an exam provides conflicting indications of the etiology of the condition. An Illinois podiatrist takes this approach and reports that 20% of patients who fail to respond have MRIs indicating a partially ruptured plantar fascia.
- **More Immediate Relief – *while waiting for custom.*** Why make patients suffer while waiting for custom orthotics to be fabricated? Pre-fabricated orthotics provide immediate relief while waiting for custom; some doctors provide both types for one higher case fee.
- **An extra device – *for more continuous therapy.*** Patients today wear a wide array of formal, casual and athletic shoes. One custom device often can't fit all, and many patients want the convenience of multiple devices which is cost-prohibitive. Prefabricated orthotics provide more continuous therapy for extra shoes, slippers, certain sports, etc.

While these examples demonstrate appropriate prefabricated orthotic use, some practitioners feel that they might cannibalize more profitable custom orthotic sales. This has not proven to be the case in my practice nor in those with whom I've conferred, as the podiatrist is in complete control of when and how to dispense them. First, many uses of prefabs capture "lost revenue" – the uninsured who'd otherwise buy at the drugstore, the mild sufferer who'd turn down expensive solutions, etc. Second, many uses of prefabricated orthotics provide an "incremental usage opportunity", whether as a 2nd device, while waiting for custom, or from the casual chat with nail or other patients whom would be receptive to prefabricated orthotics.

Finally, and most importantly, dispensing prefabs in-office enables better medicine and greater patient satisfaction and value. Patients see ads for alternatives on TV, the internet and in specialty stores all the time; offering prefabricated orthotics is critical to remain competitive and avoid sending patients out the door with pain to fend for themselves. And as with any business, satisfied customers and the compounded value of their repeat visits and referrals remain at the heart of any successful practice.