

## Foot Care for Ultra Trail Runners

All runners should take good care of their feet, but ultra-trail runners face their own set of obstacles because of the distance as well as the terrain. Of course your shoes are an integral part of a successful finish, but if your feet aren't prepared then you have failed to prepare.

TOENAIL PAIN is caused by two factors: improper shoe fit and lack of proper nail hygiene. If your shoes are too short then your toes will bang into them with every step (worse of course downhill.) Same as if your shoes are too long; your feet will slosh back and forth causing repeated contusions to your toes. Once your nails have been bounced against the toe box of your shoes enough, the nail will loosen, lift and tear the skin underneath. This is what causes the dark red coloration under the nail: blood.

If your nails are too long, then they are even more susceptible to trauma and again painful blood accumulation under the nail will occur. To avoid nail pain, consider the following:

--avoid socks with large seams at the toes.

--size your trail shoes ½ to 1 size larger than your usual shoes. (This allows for foot swelling.)

--proper shoe fit allows your feet to sit inside the shoe comfortably and the lacing to lock down your feet to avoid slippage.

--cut your nails 3-5 days before the race.

--file nails across the top to thin them.

BLISTERS form as a result of heat, moisture and friction. Shoe fit is of the utmost importance and your shoe should include a toe box wide enough to allow your toes to spread (thus reducing friction between toes.) Equally important is sock selection. If your socks are too tight, they allow for crowding of your toes. If they are too big they will bunch up or slide around inside your shoe—either way causing friction. Moisture plays a large role in blister formation. Socks that wick and dry rather quickly are essential for ultra-trail running. Natural fibers allow for temperature regulation (insulation in the cold weather, cooling effect when your feet get warmer.) Avoid high levels of constricting spandex and avoid cotton. Choose socks with natural fiber construct such as wool. Some leaders in the ultra-trail sock category are:

--Darn Tough- a wool based option (with a lifetime guarantee.)

--Injinji- the infamous toe-sock which help hold toes straight and separates the toes to reduce friction.

--DryMax- which mechanically moves moisture away from your foot rather than simple wicking.

--Inov-8-the Debrisoc made with merino wool has a built-in flap to fold over your shoe opening to create a gaiter to protect your feet from sticks, rocks and mud.

LUBRICANT isn't just for thighs, clothing straps and nipples. Using plenty of it between your toes, along the soles and heels of your feet, and particularly over any known trouble spots, helps to reduce friction and blister formation. Consider one of these lubricants:

--Rocket Pure Anti-Chafe Balm Stick which tends to leave less residue than other products.

--Hydropel Salve by Genesis Pharmaceutical which reduces friction between skin and sock as well as between skin and skin. It also repels water!

If you sense a “hot spot” during your run, pay attention and address it. It might take a few extra minutes but doing so makes the last few hours of running a lot more tolerable. Options include:

--adjusting socks and shoes.

--adding more lubricant.

--change into dry socks and shoes (which you brought in your drop bag) after you have passed all of the river crossings or particularly wet or muddy areas.

If you have a tendency or history of developing blisters or thick calluses on the BALL OF YOUR FEET, consider taping your feet before the race. Some tips for taping:

--Elastikon Tape is very durable and stays on well.

--An adherent such as Tincture of Benzoin can be used as a pre-tape.

--Tape should be applied only as a single layer so as to avoid overheating and to prevent problems as your feet swell.

--Apply taping so as to come up over the sides of your feet.

--Be kind to your feet when removing the tape. Baby oil makes a perfect de-adherent.

SHOES are a highly “individual” decision, but for ultra-trail running consider the following specifications:

--select ½ to 1 full size larger than usual to allow for swelling.

--a large wide toe box helps reduce toe crowding.

--light weight shoe.

--breathable mesh upper to reduce moisture and heat.

--mud and water resistant fabrics.

--reinforced or thicker toe and forefoot protection (think “rocks and roots”).

--a lower seated heel helps to prevent ankle sprains.

--a less stiff shoe allows for more ground contact and stability on trail terrain.

FINAL WORDS OF FOOT CARE ADVICE for Ultra-Trail runners:

--don’t lose focus on the terrain. Pay attention.

--don’t look at your watch. Keep your eyes on the trail (or walk when you don’t.)

--pick your feet up high enough to clear the objects on the trail: repeat often!

Dr Kristin K Titko, at the Center for Foot Care, is a foot and ankle specialist in the Liberty Township and Mt. Healthy areas. She specializes in sports injuries and is a trail and road runner. She is excited and honored to be the principle sponsor for the Feral Hog 50K and hopes your race is a successful and challenging one.

