

Can slipping a small lift into your shoe ease the pain of Achilles tendon problems, or is it just a placebo effect?

What is the problem?

Millions of people suffer from painful Achilles tendon problems that make walking and running difficult, leading many to try shoe inserts like heel lifts for relief.



How did the team study the question?

Researchers randomly assigned 108 people with Achilles tendon pain to wear either real heel lifts or fake inserts in their shoes for 12 weeks, then compared their pain levels without telling them which group they were in.

What did the team find?

The study found that people who wore real heel lifts had slightly less pain in their Achilles tendon after 12 weeks compared to those who wore fake inserts. However, this small difference might not be enough for most people to actually notice an improvement in their daily lives. The heel lifts didn't seem to change how the foot and ankle moved very much, which was surprising to the researchers. Overall, the results suggest that heel lifts might help a little bit with Achilles tendon pain, but they probably shouldn't be the main treatment healthcare providers recommend.

How can this research be used?

Healthcare providers and physical therapists can use this information to better advise patients with Achilles tendon pain. While heel lifts might offer some relief, they shouldn't be relied on as the main treatment. Instead, healthcare providers should focus on proven exercises and other therapies as the primary approach. Patients considering heel lifts should know they may experience noticeable improvement in pain, but this benefit may be partly due to placebo-related effects rather than direct mechanical changes. This knowledge helps both providers and patients make informed decisions about managing Achilles tendon problems, potentially saving time and money on treatments that may not be very effective.

Cautions

This study had some shortcomings to keep in mind. It only looked at the effects of heel lifts for 12 weeks, so we don't know if they help or hurt in the long run. Although all participants were not aware of their received treatment and group, the people in the fake group tended to believe less in their treatment, which may have influenced how much improvement they experienced. Also, the people in the study volunteered after seeing advertisements, so they might not represent all people with Achilles tendon pain. Lastly, while the heel lifts seemed to help a little, the improvement was small, and we can't be sure if it was enough to make a real difference in people's daily lives.

Citation

Bourke, J., Munteanu, S. E., Garofolini, A., & Malliaras, P. (2025). Efficacy of heel lifts for managing midportion Achilles tendinopathy (The LIFT Trial): A participant- and outcome assessor-blinded randomized controlled trial. *Journal of Orthopaedic & Sports Physical Therapy*, 55(9), 611-620.

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