

Performance Boosters

Stronger foot muscles can end ankle sprains and aching arches.

As you hike, the muscles in your feet and ankles flex and contract in an intricate series of mechanical movements. Like any muscles, those in your feet can be strengthened to do their job—namely handle high mileage and heavy loads—with greater ease, which is especially important if you have unusually high or low arches. Perform the following exercises two to three times weekly.

Towel pulls: Place a towel on the floor with a book or 5-pound weight on one end. While seated, plant your bare heels on the other end of the towel and draw the weighted end of the towel toward you by curling it with your toes. Repeat 10 times.

Ankle builders: While standing or sitting, place a 4-foot length of heavy rubber tubing, elastic band, or bungee cord under the middle of your foot and grasp one end in each hand. To strengthen the inside of your ankle, pull on the side of the cord that's farthest from your big toe and resist with your ankle (called "inversion"). Hold for 5 seconds. To work the outside ankle muscles, pull on the side of the cord that's closest to your big toe and resist (called "eversion"). Note: Eversion strengthening is very helpful for people with a history of sprained ankles.

Jump rope: It develops foot muscles along with leg muscles and the cardiovascular system. Start out jumping rope for 1 minute three times a week, then increase the length of the sessions by 1 minute per week thereafter, with the goal of a 15-minute routine.