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Podiatrists Prescribe Orthotics to Alleviate Common Foot Problems

*Buyers Must Beware of Differences Between Prescription Orthotics
and Arch Supports*

Bethesda, Md. – When your feet hurt, even the simplest task can be agonizing. Consumers often look for quick relief to ease the pain of throbbing heels and toes, commonly caused by foot conditions or improperly fitted footwear. Prescription orthotic devices, shoe inserts that are intended to correct common ailments or abnormal walking patterns, are worn by about 8 percent of Americans to alleviate foot aches and pains.

These days, retail stores advertising “custom-made” inserts, arch supports, and insoles are cropping up on street corners all across the country. In fact, according to a recent survey conducted by the American Podiatric Medical Association (APMA), 17 percent of people who wear orthotics bought them in a retail store rather than from a trained health care professional. While all these foot health products tout similar remedies, buyers can benefit from understanding the differences between medically prescribed orthotic devices and over-the-counter shoe inserts.

APMA offers the following guidance for consumers purchasing a device to help save their feet and wallets from the agony of ineffective or damaging foot care products:

- **Don't live with foot pain.** A podiatrist provides comprehensive care by examining, diagnosing and treating foot pain. Based on a patient's diagnosis, podiatrists often prescribe orthoses as a conservative approach to many common foot ailments. Only a licensed health care professional can diagnose and prescribe medical treatments, including orthotics.
- **Find the prescription that's right for you.** Prescribed orthotic devices fall into three broad categories: rigid orthoses, which primarily attempt to maintain the foot in the proper functional position; soft orthoses, which offer minimal support but primarily help absorb shock, increase balance, and take pressure off sore spots; and semi-rigid orthoses, which provide a combination of functional support and balance while walking or participating in sports. Wearing the wrong type of shoe insert can be detrimental to feet, especially for people with diabetes or arthritis. Additionally, the more rigid the device, the greater chance the patient has of developing complications.
- **Spending more can get you less.** Not all over-the-counter shoe inserts are effective—no matter the price. Consulting with a podiatrist before trying products from retail stores can help consumers select a device that treats their ailment, thus saving them time, pain, and money.
- **Beware of the buildup.** Consumers should be wary of products with lofty claims or promises of comfort based solely on size. Without proper diagnosis, even “custom-made” inserts can be inadequate.

- **Consider other treatment options.** Although APMA's survey found that prescribing custom foot orthotics was the most common treatment received from podiatrists, they may not be a solution for everyone. An APMA member podiatrist can provide and determine a treatment option that's right for you.
- **Check with insurance providers.** Although prescription orthotic devices can be expensive, they may be covered by insurance. Check with your insurance company or health care administrator to find out how much of the cost will be picked up by your plan. Over-the-counter or "custom-made" shoe inserts from retail stores are rarely covered by insurance.

To locate an APMA member podiatrist in your area, go to www.apma.org.

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Founded in 1912, the American Podiatric Medical Association represents the nation's premier foot and ankle physicians. The Association has component societies in 53 locations in the U.S. and its territories and a membership of more than 12,500 doctors of podiatric medicine. For free foot health information, visit www.apma.org.