



# Over-the-Counter Arch Supports in Your Practice

These devices can play an important role in your treatment plan.

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*Tips from the Trenches features practice management issues, and is written exclusively for PM by members of the Institute for Podiatric Excellence and Development (IPED). IPED's mission is to motivate, inspire, and synergistically bridge the gap between students, residents, new practitioners, and seasoned veterans in the field of podiatric medicine. They are committed to the idea that mentors with passion to share and mentees eager to learn make a powerful combination that allows IPED to bring and renew a full life to podiatric physicians, their practices, and their well-being throughout the U.S. and beyond. Visit [www.podiatricexcellence.org](http://www.podiatricexcellence.org).*

Podiatry has changed quite a bit in the last several years. Managed care is squeezing reimbursement rates. Patients are divided among insured and uninsured. Medical information and equipment are readily available to the masses. 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 the ever-changing environment of practicing medicine, the paradigm of using over-the-counter arch supports (OTC) versus custom orthotics

**1) Presenting Correctly**—Don't be afraid and don't complicate it. Your patients come to you for an answer, so give it to them! It's this simple. "For plantar fasciitis, we generally prescribe a custom or an OTC arch support in our initial treatment protocol. "I think in your case, we can get

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is also shifting. Most everyone uses over-the-counter arch supports, but are you using them in the most effective manner in your practice?

## The Presentation

Let's not debate the efficacy of OTC arch supports vs. custom orthotics here. Let's fast forward to you presenting (selling) an OTC to your patient. Surveys have shown that most clinics that have established a profitable revenue center with OTCs use similar approaches.

away with an OTC support to start out with." (Hero!). "The OTC support we carry is the best one on the market, it is only sold to doctors and is much more affordable than custom orthotics" (Hero!). Most patients are prepared to be told that they will need custom orthotics when visiting their podiatrist. By your telling them they may not need customs makes you a hero! Remind them that these won't last as long as a custom and they will need to be replaced every six to eight months.

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**2) Charging the Correct Amount**—The sweet spot seems to be around \$49-\$59 per pair. Charge too little and you are shorting your profit; charge too much and your patients will shop around. Also, don't be short-sighted in thinking you are losing money by selling more OTC supports. You should be profiting around \$45 per pair on an OTC. By having your patients come back every six to eight months, you are realizing the same amount of profit over a five-year period as you would by selling them one pair of custom orthotics. Let's face it, we would all rather spend \$60 eight times than \$480 in one lump sum. In addition, this helps maintain your "connection" to the patient with more frequent visits, and cements "Hero" status every six months!

**3) Using a Company that "Partners, Not Competes"**—Keep your patients coming back to you, not the Internet. If you are carrying a brand that is sold online (e.g., Amazon, eBay, or in a retail store) you have hit yourself in the head with a ball-pen hammer! Your \$59 answer to your patient's plantar fasciitis should NOT be found elsewhere for half-price. This will erode patient confidence quicker than you can say "Hero to Zero." Need I say more?

**4) Making Subsequent Purchases Easy**—When your patient comes back to you, make it quick and easy for them to purchase another pair. Make sure you have all sizes in stock and if you don't, have your vendor ship it directly to your patient at no extra charge (Hero!). Patients shouldn't pay the price for you not having their size in stock. You also shouldn't have to worry that your vendor might sell directly to your patients. If that's the case, then you are using the wrong vendor! Your custom orthotic lab wouldn't dare sell directly to your patients, and neither should your OTC vendor. Establish a mutually beneficial partnership with your vendor as it will pay off down the road. Once you find one that is on your side, be loyal to them because they are being loyal to you.

**5) Being a Hero**—This is easy if you use the points above! Your patients are seeking options and solutions. Pre-fabricated arch supports provide a feasible treatment option when a custom device is just not realistic. There is a paradigm shift going on in the OTC vs. custom usage meter. Where the pendulum stops varies from practice to practice. Make sure your practice is optimizing all the proper strategies to increase and maintain the OTC revenue stream. If you aren't sure how to do this, just ask a Hero!

While these examples demonstrate appropriate pre-fabricated 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 pre-fabricated devices capture "lost revenue"—the uninsured who'd otherwise buy at the drugstore, the mild sufferer who'd turn down expensive

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## Dispensing pre-fabricated devices in-office enables better medicine and greater patient satisfaction and value.

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### The Rationale

So when and why should you use over-the-counter arch supports?

- **More Affordable Therapy**—for patients who can't afford or won't pay for custom. Pre-fabricated orthotics provide an affordable solution—and a recurring revenue stream to cover the scheduling, evaluation, and set-up costs of new uninsured patients.

- **First Line Therapy**—for mild-to-moderate conditions. Podiatrists regularly encounter 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 where pre-fabricated devices are indicated.

- **Pre-Custom Therapy**—for better diagnosis. A good pre-fabricated orthotic can be effective diagnostically to determine if improved biomechanics relieves pain.

- **More Immediate Relief**—while waiting for custom. Pre-fabricated orthotics provide immediate relief while waiting for custom devices; 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. A custom device often can't fit all of their shoes, or patients don't want multiple custom-made devices.

solutions, etc. Second, many uses of pre-fabricated orthotics provide an "incremental usage opportunity", whether as a second device, while waiting for a custom device, or from the casual chat with other patients who would be receptive to pre-fabricated orthotics.

Finally, and most importantly, dispensing pre-fabricated devices in-office enable 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 pre-fabricated 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 repeated visits and referrals remain at the heart of any successful practice. **PM**



**Dr. Ornstein** is Chairman of the Institute for Podiatric Excellence and Development (IPED) and a national and international lecturer and author on practice management topics. He serves on the editorial advisory board

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