Create Custom Orthotics In-House in Just 30 Minutes

Podiatrists and patients are happy with the Podiatech solution, which fits practices of all sizes.

BY ANDREA LINNE

"Each month, our practice makes 30 to 40 pairs of custom orthotics," says James Anderson, DPM, of Podiatry 1st, which has offices in Belleville, Columbia and O'Fallon, IL. "We have the Podiatech system at two of our offices. Since my associate and I began offering orthotics made in-house, rather than outsourcing them to a lab, we've at least doubled the number of orthotics patients order. Today, people expect immediate gratification, and the Podiatech process provides that. During the fabrication process, we ask patients to tell us how the orthotic feels, which allows us to make any necessary adjustments to help ensure a successful fit the first time. And if adjustments to the orthotic need to be made at a future visit, this can easily and quickly be done right in the office at the time of their visit.

"In addition to local patients, we have patients fly in from all over the country, including NFL and professional baseball players."—Graddon

"We hear from a lot of our patients that they had orthotics from other providers and they didn't like them, stopped wearing them and never went back to the doctor," Dr. Anderson says. "They often indicated they may have liked the doctor but were frustrated with the product or said they didn't have time to go back. So, if you don't get it right the first time, patients often don't come back and you'll never know why."

"While I got the Podiatech Premium Station installed at my office in 2019, I didn't begin to use it until October 2020," says Brett Stark, DPM, whose Auburn Foot Care Center is in Auburn, AL. "That month, we made 40 custom orthotics and covered the cost of the system. I made 15 pairs of orthotics in November and 20 in December." It's a small practice: Dr. Stark, two medical assistants and an office manager.

"On average, we make 17 pairs of custom orthotics a day with the Podiatech system," says Marcia Graddon, ATC, BOCPD, director of orthotics and bracing for the Orthopaedic Foot and Ankle Center, in Falls Church, VA. This is a large practice that includes one podiatrist, three foot and ankle doctors, two physician assistants and three physical therapists. To keep up with demand, both Graddon and an assistant fit and make the custom orthotics. "We run two machines all the time. People learn about our custom orthotics from word of mouth. In addition to local patients, we have patients fly in from all over the country, including NFL and professional baseball players."

Podiatech is the medical branch of the French company Sidas, which you may be familiar with if you're a skier. Many ski resorts and ski boot companies offer Sidas custom-molded insoles, designed to support the foot and improve comfort and performance. In 1985, Sidas created Podiatech to meet the needs of French foot-health professionals. The solution, which creates custom orthotics in roughly 30 minutes, is based on the same technology that is used at ski shops but with different materials and equipment.

Podiatech was introduced in the United States in 2012, thanks to Nolan Dubord who had been working for 20 years in ski shops as a ski boot and orthotic fitter using Sidas technology and products. "During that time, some of my customers began asking me to make orthotics for other sports, including running, tennis and golf," Dubord says. "I began exhibiting at athletic trade shows,

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New Concepts and Studies

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and then, through word of mouth, I got invited into the podiatry world. I became a sales rep for Sidas and worked on commission, and then in 2015, I joined the company." Dubord learned how to fit and make orthotics on the job and is currently in the process of becoming a certified pedorthist.

The Premium Station requires a footprint of 3 feet of width and 4 feet of depth. The practice will need counter space for working and an area for grinding.

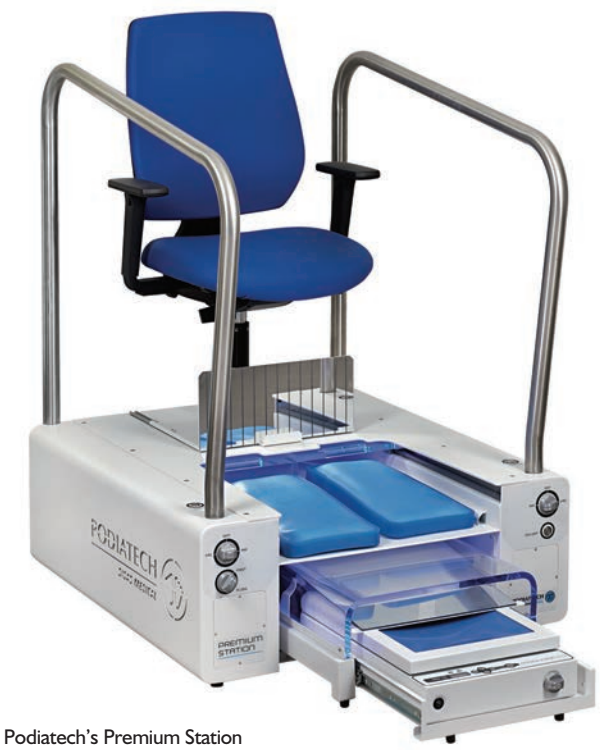
For the next two years, Dubord worked with Sidas to adapt the Podiatech solution, including equipment, materials, training and pricing, to the needs of U.S. podiatrists. "Now we have proof of concept. Since 2017, I've sold 26 systems," Dubord says. "Every practice that bought the system continues to use it. The key to success is satisfaction for both the podiatrist and the patient. The complete process takes just 30 minutes, patients leave the same day as their appointment with their orthotics and podiatrists get paid that day. I like to say, 'We sell the kitchen and the ingredients, but you can choose what to cook.' Podiatrists do not have to alter their methods or practice to utilize our system."

How to Create Custom Orthotics in 30 Minutes

The Podiatech solution features the Premium Station, an ergonomic workstation that includes a podoscope, adjustable seat for height and size, two vacuum silicon bags—the podiatrists call them "pillows"—and oven. Podiatrists can choose from a range of preassembled insoles—Dubord calls them "orthotic blanks." A scissor and grinder are needed to finish the orthotics. The Premium Station requires a footprint of 3 feet of width and 4 feet of depth. The practice will need counter space for working and an area for grinding.

Nolan Dubord

"Basically, we have three blank models," Dubord says. "A functional one to correct foot pathologies, an athletic one and one that fits in dress shoes. Within each model, we have many variations. Some blanks use two materials and some 12 materials. I help podiatrists choose the models that are best suited to their clientele. I have one practice, for example, that sees a lot of athletes, so it stocks sports and position-specific orthotics. For football, we wouldn't give a lineman and a wide receiver the same model. We have options for distance and casual runners, as well as for soccer players. And we have several different dress shoe models. In addition, we work



Podiatech's Premium Station

with clients on special orders. Graddon, for example, prefers specific materials in the models she offers patients, and we can create models with logos or in requested colors."

To access the seat, a patient steps onto the slide-out podoscope, a Plexiglass platform with a mirror underneath and LED lights. It illuminates the foot showing pressure points, pronation or other issues. "The image

"Instead of thinking about ordering orthotics at later date, or ordering them and not picking them up, they walk out of the office satisfied."—Dubord

can't be saved," Dubord says. "It just provides a quick analysis so you can see what you're dealing with and it helps you choose the appropriate orthotic."

Underneath the podoscope is the oven, which, under vacuum pressure, heats and laminates the materials used in each orthotic. The heating time is roughly 4 minutes. During that time, the podiatrist or another staff member who is the fitter positions the patient's feet on the vacuum silicon bags, correcting the stance that is causing a problem and taking an imprint of each foot. This can be done from a standing or non-weight-bearing position.

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When the orthotics come out of the oven, they are fully pliable with a consistency like soft putty. They are placed in the pillows and the patient stands on them for 2 to 3 minutes. They feel warm, not hot. Then, the orthotics are cooled for a few minutes in a freezer or freezer bag. If it's a standard orthotic and the patient doesn't need modifications, the next step is to trim the surplus material so the orthotic matches the stock insole of the footwear and fits in the shoe. "We provide a scissor, but it's pretty standard," Dubord says. "You just need a strong scissor." If a patient needs a correction, then before trimming, you add posting, adhering on a stabilizer or corrective wedge to hold the foot in the corrected position. We sell pre-adhered posting materials that have an adhesive so it can be heated and formed to the orthotic. It's part of the training and takes only a few minutes extra work."

The final step is to smooth the edges with a grinder. "The Gravity 600 grinder keeps all the dust inside the box and it's quiet," Dubord says, "but I also recommend the Sani-Grinder. It's not ours, but it's a great product for smaller practices."

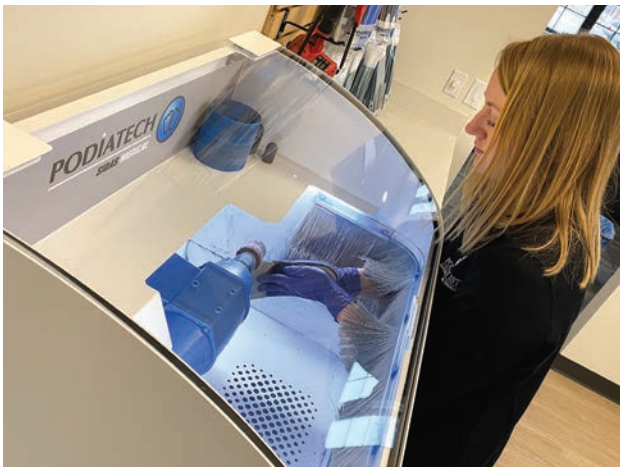
Training and Designated Fitters

"I like to set up a one- or two-day training with all staff members," Dubord says. "It's important for the podiatrists to know how the system works, but typically they're busy seeing patients so a staff member becomes the dedicated fitter and fabricator. And you never know who will take to the job. Often, it's a medical assistant, but occasionally, it's an office manager. I do have a few doctors who like to do it themselves. In other cases, the podiatrist will hold the correction of the foot and an assistant will finish the orthotic."

Marcia Graddon

Dr. Stark is the first to admit that training is important. "I knew the machine was good," he says, "but I wasn't sure of the materials. "Then, I had additional training with Nolan. Turns out, I didn't know how to match the materials to the right person to correct their problem. I trained my staff, and one of my medical assistants makes most of the orthotics. He really likes it and wants to become a certified pedorthist."

"Nolan trained all of our staff over two days, over the weekend," Dr. Anderson says. "He suggested we have everyone in our office attend. Often, you think the person who will be the best isn't. Although I was trained, I don't typically fabricate the orthotics as this is definitely a skill set you can delegate to a staff member. In my practice, our receptionist showed the greatest interest and aptitude, even though she wasn't involved with patient care before. She loves fabricating the orthotics so much so that we recently sent her to pedorthist school. The additional training isn't necessary, but it adds to her background and gives her more knowledge and confidence."



Dr. Anderson's Staff Member Fabricating Orthotics

"When I first began using the Podiatech system, it took me about an hour to make a pair of orthotics," Graddon says. "Now, the whole process takes roughly 30 minutes. Nolan taught me how to use the machine. The trial and error involved choosing the right materials. I worked with Sidas for two years to create materials I thought were best for our practice. Using the machine wasn't complicated. The challenge was to learn which materials to use to solve a patient's problem. It's a skill and it takes experience to learn. If we have to make an adjustment, it usually takes 5 minutes or less."

"Patients love that the Podiatech system is interactive."—Graddon

Return on Investment

Dubord believes Podiatech has a bright future in the United States. "Patients like being part of the process, so they are more willing to try orthotics," he says. "Instead of thinking about ordering orthotics at later date, or ordering them and not picking them up, they walk out of the office satisfied. If they have any discomfort, adjustments can be made immediately, so they don't have to make another trip to the office and then wait for the orthotics to come back from the lab, which could take weeks. It's extremely profitable for podiatrists," he says. "It changes the bottom line pretty quickly."

The system costs $13,000. "We have different pricing options—purchase, lease or a finance plan," Dubord says. "The system includes the Premium Station and 45 pairs of blanks, which are enough to offset the entire purchase, based on $300 reimbursement for a pair of orthotics. The cost for additional blanks ranges from $35 to $50, depending on features, materials and size."

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Dr. Stark advises podiatrists to look into Podiatech. "The learning curve isn't that steep, especially if you've had any biomechanical training in school and residency," he says. "It could really help with control over orthotics, patient satisfaction and revenue."


James Anderson, DPM

"Patients love that the Podiatech system is interactive," Graddon says. "It gives them a lot of confidence that the orthotics are really made for their feet. That feeling and attitude makes a huge difference in their recovery. These orthotics provide a better fit than the ones you get from a lab, and there are no shipping charges. Since you're making them on the patients, the contours of the foot are exact. There's no difference in cost to the patient, but the profitability is far superior for our practice."

"When we got the first system for our Belleville office, we put it in our retail area," Dr. Anderson says. "Patients could watch the process from the waiting room, and it generated a lot of interest. When we opened our second office in Columbia, it was in a new building so we designed that space with a separate room and a glass wall facing the reception room, so patients could see the process but still maintain a little privacy for the patient being fitted for orthotics. We definitely get more patients requesting a second and third pair of orthotics. Many patients refer friends, family and coworkers for orthotics. Nolan is an exceptional rep and immediately responds to any questions or when you need to order supplies. He's always available with guidance, support and even suggestions on how to fabricate an orthotic for a specific condition or situation to help ensure you succeed." **PM**

"We definitely get more patients requesting a second and third pair of orthotics."—Anderson

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