ADJUSTABLE DORSAL NIGHT SPLINT

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Related U.S. Application Data

Continuation of application No. 12/879,818, filed on Sep. 10, 2010, now Pat. No. 8,409,123.

ABSTRACT

A dorsal night splint has dynamic adjustable features that allow the patient to adjust the splint while in use to control the stretching of the plantar fascia and Achilles. A semi-rigid flexible frame is included along with a tightening strap that is anchored to the frame and by which the patient can tension the strap and adjust the structure of the frame to fit the patient’s desired therapeutic or prophylactic needs.
Figure 2B
ADJUSTABLE DORSAL NIGHT SPLINT

RELATED APPLICATIONS

[0001] This application claims the benefit of U.S. patent application Ser. No. 12/879,818, filed Sep. 10, 2010, which is hereby incorporated by reference herein in its entirety.

BACKGROUND

[0002] Plantar fasciitis is a painful condition that arises when the plantar fascia under a patient’s arch becomes strained or over-stretched. The condition can be particularly painful after extended rest periods during which the fascia stiffens and tightens. When the patient stands after that rest period, the stiffened fascia are pressed by the force of the patient’s weight, causing further pain.

[0003] Various devices have been used to treat this condition, typically employing a stiff frontal frame that fits against the front of the patient’s leg and extends in an L-shape along the patient’s foot, being held to the patient by straps that wrap around the patient’s leg and foot. An example is the dorsal night splint disclosed in U.S. Pat. No. 5,776,090 to Bergman. The Bergman splint includes a frame held to the anterior side of a patient’s lower leg by straps. The frame has stiffening ribs that permit it to hold its shape and is bent, prior to the patient putting it on, so the frame’s foot end and foreleg portions are held at a pre-set angle.

[0004] A variation in the Bergman splint is disclosed in U.S. Patent Application No. 2008/0208094 of Gaylord. The Gaylord splint has an adjustable stabilizing frame that is also pre-bent to a predetermined angle, and a soft sheet of fabric with tensioning arms that wrap around the perimeter of the leg and frame to anchor the frame to the lower leg. Another example is the Exoform® Dorsal Night Splint sold by Ossur. That splint includes a soft attachment system and a metal plate within a plastic housing. The splint is bent by the patient into a pre-set L-shaped form, prior to application, with the splint retaining this pre-set angle during use. Another variation is disclosed in U.S. Pat. No. 7,682,325 to Chan, which includes a plate that has an accordion-like middle section and is bent into a pre-defined shape.

[0005] The frames used in the foregoing products and other similar technologies are cumbersome and are adjustable by the patient only after the frames are applied to the leg. If the splint does not fit properly, it must be removed before it can be adjusted, which takes more time and can lead to reduced patient compliance.

[0006] Some technologies have attempted to provide more adjustability to the device. One example is disclosed in U.S. Patent Application No. 2009/0264803 of Darby et al., which includes a flexible frame with a toe strap used to elevate the patient’s toes to relieve pain in the plantar fascia. That structure provides no ability for the patient to adjust the frame while positioned on the foot, and thus may not provide for a sufficiently deep stretch of the plantar fascia.

[0007] An improved system is needed to address these and other deficiencies, to achieve better fitting splints that can improve patient therapy and produce greater patient compliance.

SUMMARY

[0008] Disclosed herein is a contoured, padded splint to be applied to the foot and lower leg of a patient for treatment of plantar fasciitis and Achilles tendinitis. The splint is formed as a brace that is dynamic and adjustable by the patient, after being placed on the patient, allowing the patient to achieve tailored flexion and optimal comfort for addressing these conditions. Patients can sleep at night and start their day with fascia that have been stretched and prepared for walking.

[0009] The splint generally includes a semi-rigid flexible frame configured to be applied along the ventral (or anterior) side of the foot and lower leg, and a tightening strap configured to allow the patient to tighten the splint to stretch the plantar fascia.

[0010] In certain implementations, the splint includes a semi-rigid flexible frame with a top side and an under side, the frame forming a proximal surface that extends vertically along a user’s shin and upper ankle, and a distal surface that extends along the top of the user’s foot. The proximal surface has a first receptacle, positioned centrally along the face, for engaging a tightening strap, and the distal surface has a second receptacle for also engaging a tightening strap.

[0011] The tightening strap is an inelastic adjustable strap that engages the first and second receptacles and is configured to be tightened by hand after the splint is placed on the patient’s lower leg. The tightening strap can be formed in a pulley system, with an extending end. The patient tightens the strap by pulling on the extending end and, as the extended end is pulled, the proximal surface and distal surface are pulled toward each other, thereby stretching the user’s plantar fascia under the arch and heel. The proximal and distal surfaces of the frame are then anchored in a fixed position relative to each other by securing the tightening strap.

[0012] A soft housing is also included to fit under the user’s foot and attach the frame to the user’s lower leg. In certain embodiments, the soft housing is made of laminate, Neoprene or other fabric.

[0013] In certain implementations, the splint includes a forefoot support pad positioned between the user’s toes and the soft housing. The forefoot support pad is configured to fit comfortably to the patient’s toes and the ball of the foot. In certain examples, the forefoot support pad includes a distal lift area that fits under the toes, a proximal support area that fits behind the ball of the patient’s foot, and a trough between the support areas which holds the ball of the patient’s foot.

[0014] In certain examples, an adjustable toe strap is included to attach to the soft housing and extend around the distal end of the patient’s toes and connect with the distal surface of the frame. In certain examples, the toe strap is configured with an attachment mechanism, such as a D-ring, that allows it to inter-fit with the attachment strap and be secured to the frame by operation and tightening of the attachment strap. In certain examples, a liner or support pad is also used to fit between the frame and the patient’s leg, thereby providing comfort and enhanced wearability. In certain implementations, the support pad is made of open cell foam to provide air circulation and moisture wicking.

[0015] The frame of the splint may be configured with receptacles, including slots, and hinge mechanisms that receive tightening straps and serve as anchoring points for securing the splint to the patient. In certain examples, the frame includes one or more hinged flaps that extend along lateral and medial edges of the frame, and each flap has a through-hole or slot that receives tightening straps to help adjust and fit the splint to the patient. The frame may also include tapered or cut-out sections that allow the frame to contour to particular anatomical locations on the patient, such as the ankle region.
Various alternative embodiments and sub-features are also disclosed herein with respect to the splint, as will become apparent in the following description.

**BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE FIGURES**

Exemplary implementations of the dorsal night splint are described and shown below in the following figures, where like numerals represent like structures in repeating figures.

**FIG. 1** depicts an exemplary embodiment of a dorsal night splint, applied to a patient’s lower leg.

**FIGS. 2A and 2B** show top and under side views, respectively, of the frame used in an exemplary dorsal night splint according to the disclosure herein.

**FIGS. 3A and 3B** show underside views of the frame of FIGS. 2A and 2B, with an attachment mechanism.

**FIGS. 4A and 4B** show additional implementations and embodiments of the frame and strapping systems of FIG. 1.

**FIG. 5** shows an implementation of a dorsal night splint having a soft housing and brace componentry in an unattached configuration.

**FIG. 6** depicts the dorsal night splint of FIG. 5 in an attached configuration.

**FIG. 7** depicts a support pad being used in a dorsal night splint.

**FIGS. 8A and 8B** depict examples of the support pad of FIG. 7 in a dorsal night splint.

**DETAILED DESCRIPTION**

Disclosed herein is a contoured, padded splint to be applied to the lower leg of a patient for treatment of planter fasciitis and Achilles tendinitis. The splint is dynamic and adjustable by the patient, allowing the patient to achieve tailored flexion and optimal comfort for addressing these conditions. Wearing the splint allows patients to sleep comfortably at night and start their day on a better foot.

The splint includes a semi-rigid flexible frame configured to fit along the ventral (anterior) side of the foot and lower leg, and an inelastic tightening strap configured to allow the patient to tighten the splint and stretch the plantar fascia.

An exemplary embodiment of the splint is shown in FIG. 1, as the splint 100. The splint 100 has a flexible, semi-rigid frame 102 that is applied to a user’s lower leg by a flexible insole housing 114 that wraps around the dorsal (posterior) side of the foot and anchors the frame 102 to the leg.

As shown, the frame 102 fits over a support pad 140 that cushions the frame 102 against the leg. The pad fits between the patient and the frame 102 and cushions the patient’s leg with respect to the frame 102. In certain implementations, the support pad 140 is made of a layer of open-cell foam affixed to a closed-cell foam liner, the closed cell foam liner having hook-and-loop material that attaches to complementary hook-and-loop material on the under side of the frame 102. The open cell foam of the pad 140 provides for air circulation to cool the patient and moderate moisture within the brace, thus improving its usability for nighttime wear.

A flexible strap 120 is included, extending from the distal surface 106, in front of the patient’s foot, to the distal tip of the pad 140 and connecting to the splint on the bottom side of the soft housing 114.

The frame 102 includes a proximal surface 104 that fits along the user’s lower leg, a distal surface 106 that fits along the user’s foot, and a bend 105 that spans between the proximal and distal surfaces. A tightening strap 108 with pull tab 109 extends between the proximal surface 104 and the distal surface 106 of the frame 102, allowing the patient to adjust and tighten the splint by hand while it is applied to the patient’s leg, as explained more fully below. The frame 102 is constructed of a semi-rigid but flexible material, which can bend upon the application of a force applied by a tensioning strap but is also sturdy enough to resist that force in a controlled manner, unlike a cloth or sock which would simply fold or stretch when the force is applied. In certain implementations, the frame is made of flexible polypropylene by injection molding, but lightweight aluminum or another semi-rigid materials could also be used.

**FIGS. 2A and 2B** illustrate the frame 102 and its cross strap 108 in further detail. As shown in FIGS. 2A and 2B, the frame 102 has a plurality of hinged flaps 121 and 125 and slots 116 and 118 positioned along respective edges of the frame. In certain embodiments, the hinged flaps and slots are co-molded with the frame and integral to the polypropylene material of the frame. As shown, the flap 121 is connected to the edge 131 of the frame by a thin piece of plastic 123, which because of its thin cross section can bend as a hinge point. Similarly, the flap 125 is connected to the edge 135 of the frame by a thin plastic hinge section 127. The edge 135 forms a cut-out or narrowing section of the frame, providing the curve-out section 133 of bend area 105 that tapers in toward the center of the frame, for a more particular and comfortable fit around the user’s ankle. The slot 113 is formed along the edge of the distal surface of the frame by a raised ridge 175 that extends above the distal surface of the frame. Similar structures are also included on the opposite side of the splint. As explained below, the hinged flaps and slots receive straps from the soft housing 114 to help secure the frame 102 to the leg.

The frame also has receptacles 110 and 112, located centrally across the top side of the frame, for engaging the tightening strap 108. The tightening strap 108 is made of nylon or other inelastic material and is folded into a plurality of sections that loop through the receptacles and fold back upon each other, forming a pulley and anchoring system. As shown in FIG. 1, the strap 108 extends directly between the proximal surface 104 and the distal surface 106, bypassing the bend 105, which creates a large space 153 between the strap 108 and the bend 105 along the upper surface 102a of the frame. The spacing and anchoring, and the inelasticity of the strap, allow the patient to secure and tighten the frame by hand while wearing it, thereby adjusting the tension on the plantar fascia and Achilles.

More particularly, as shown in FIGS. 3A-3B and 4A-4B, the strap 108 has a top section 108a, a bottom section 108b, a distal end section 108c, a proximal end section 108d, and a section 108e. The receptacle 112 includes three slots 112a, 112b, and 112c, and the receptacle 110 includes slots 110a and 110b. The proximal end section 108d of the strap 108 is riveted to the under side 102d of the distal surface 106 of the frame 102, creating an anchor point at the rivet 114, and the strap 108 extends through slot 112a at the bottom section 108a. The bottom section 108b extends above the exterior of the frame 102 toward the proximal surface of the frame 102, spaced above the top side 102a (and the bend 105), and protrudes into the slot 110b, forming a fold that loops underneath the proximal surface 104 and then back through the slot 110a. The top portion 108a of the strap extends back across
the exterior face of the frame, toward the distal surface of the frame, and into the slot 112b. After passing through slot 112b, the section 108c of the strap 108 forms another fold that passes under the under side 102b of the distal portion of the frame 102 and extends through the slot 112c. After passing through the slot 112c, the strap section 108c extends out the front of the brace where it is received by the patient for tightening. As shown, the pull tab 109 is positioned on one side (or may surround) the distal tip of the strap section 108c.

To tighten the brace, the patient pulls the tab 109 toward him or herself, which pulls the section 108c and in turn pulls the section 108a and then the section 108b. Because of the anchoring of the section 108a against the rivet 114, pulling the strap tightens and lifts the distal surface 106 toward the proximal surface 104, as illustrated by the directional arrow 151 of FIG. 1, thereby lifting the patient’s foot toward the shin to stretch the fascia tissue on the underside of the foot. The distal surface is drawn toward the proximal surface until the two surfaces reach a desired relative position, whereupon the patent attaches the pull tab 109 to the remainder of the strap 108 (e.g., by Velcro or other hook-and-loop attachment) to anchor the strap and the two surfaces in that position. As shown, the tab 109 is secured to the surface 108a of the strap at a position located between the receptacles 110 and 112 (e.g., a mid-way point), which centers the force applied by the distal and proximal surfaces of the frame between the two receptacles. The two surfaces are thereby anchored in the relative position, having a fixed angle between them which angle can be adjusted by the user while wearing the splint. The tensioning strap 108 thus allows the patient to easily adjust the structure of the frame itself to a desired position and tension while in use. The user can thereby select and apply a constant stretching force to the plantar fascia.

Also shown in FIGS. 3a and 3b, on the underside 102b of the frame 102, sections 150, 152, 154, 156, and 158 contain Velcro or other hook-and-loop attachment mechanisms and are included to connect the support pad 140 (which has complementary hook-and-loop materials on its surface) to the frame 102.

FIG. 4A further illustrates the footrest strap 120. The strap 120 further lifts and supports the plantar fascia and the Achilles tendon. The strap 120 is configured with a D-ring 122 on an end thereof. The D-ring receives the distal section 108c of the strap 108. Thus, when the strap 108 is tightened by pulling the tab 109, the D-ring 122 is pulled tight against the splint by the strap 108, thereby anchoring the strap 120 to the strap 108. The distal end 160 of the strap 120 is anchored by Velcro or another attachment mechanism to the bottom side of the soft housing 114. When so anchored, the strap 120 extends from the bottom of the housing 114 across the front of the support pad 140, arcing over the patient’s toes and anchoring to the top side of the soft housing 114.

As noted above, the frame 102 is secured to the patient’s leg by the flexible housing 114. The flexible housing 114 is preferably made of laminate material including 0.050" thick open-cell foam sandwiched between two layers of UBL (unbroken loop, a material that mates with hook material, e.g., from Velcro), the combination of which forms a soft, comfortable, breathable wrap that is easily attachable and detachable by the user. Other soft materials, such as Neoprene, may also be used. In use, the flexible housing 114 fits around the dorsal side of the patient’s foot and lower leg. In the illustrated implementations, the housing 114 has attachment straps and hook-and-loop attachment surfaces for securing it to the frame 102. As shown more particularly in FIG. 5, the housing 114 includes the straps 115, 117, and 119, each strap having an analogous strap on the opposite side of the housing 114. As shown, the strap 115 has an end 115a and an end 115b. The end 115a fits within the slot 116a of the hinged flap 121. The strap end 115b fits within the corresponding slot 116b on the opposite side of the frame. Similarly, the strap 117a fits within the slot 118a of the hinged flap 125a, and the strap 117b fits within the slot 118b of the hinged flap 125b. The strap 119 fits within the slot 119a=
[0041] Examples of changes, substitutions, and alterations could be made by one of skill in the art without departing from the scope of the information disclosed herein. Certain particular aspects, advantages, and modifications are within the scope of the following claims. All references cited herein are incorporated by reference in their entirety and made part of this application.

1-24. (canceled)

25. A splint for stretching a wearer’s plantar fascia, comprising:
   a first portion that extends along a wearer’s lower leg;
   a second portion that extends along a wearer’s foot; and
   a bend portion that spans between the first and second portions; and
   a tightening strap that extends between the first and second portions, wherein adjustment of the tightening strap stretches the wearer’s plantar fascia.

26. The splint of claim 25, wherein:
   the first portion extends away from the bend portion to a first end;
   the second portion extends away from the bend portion to a second end; and
   adjustment of the tightening strap changes a distance between the first and second ends.

27. The splint of claim 26, wherein adjustment of the tightening strap flexes or relaxes the bend portion.

28. The splint of claim 27, wherein the tightening strap has a first strap end that anchors to one of the first and second portions and a second strap end that is pulled by the user to tighten the splint.

29. The splint of claim 28, further comprising a receptacle positioned on one of the first and second portions of the frame, wherein the strap loops through the receptacle.

30. The splint of claim 29, wherein:
   the receptacle is positioned on the second portion of the frame; and
   the tightening strap comprises:
   a first section that extends from the first portion of the frame;
   a second section that loops through receptacle; and
   a third section that extends toward the first portion of the frame and secures to the first section.

31. The splint of claim 30, wherein the first section of the tightening strap is riveted to the first portion of the frame.

32. The splint of claim 25, further comprising a pull tab at a distal end of the tightening strap.

33. The splint of claim 32, wherein the pull tab is secured to the tightening strap to maintain stretching of the wearer’s plantar fascia.

34. The splint of claim 33, further comprising a hook and loop mechanism that secures the pull tab to the tightening strap.

35. The splint of claim 33, wherein the pull tab is secured to the tightening strap at a point that is midway between the first and second portions of the frame.

36. The splint of claim 25, further comprising a forefoot support pad attached to the second portion of the frame.

37. The splint of claim 36, wherein the forefoot support pad is releasably attached to the second portion of the frame by a hook and loop mechanism.

38. The splint of claim 36, wherein the forefoot support pad includes a distal lift area that fits under the user’s toes and a proximal support area that fits behind the ball of the user’s foot, wherein the distal lift area is thicker than the proximal support area.

39. The splint of claim 38, wherein the forefoot support pad includes a trough spaced between the distal lift area and the proximal support area for receiving the ball of the user’s foot.

40. The splint of claim 25, wherein each of the first portion, second portion, and bend portion of the frame are made of a semi-rigid material that bends upon application of a force by the tightening strap and sturdy enough to resist the force in a controlled manner.

41. A method of applying a splint to stretch a wearer’s plantar fascia, comprising:
   securing a first portion of the splint to the wearer’s lower leg with a first attaching strap;
   securing a second portion of the splint to the wearer’s lower leg with a second attaching strap; and
   adjusting a tightening strap, wherein adjustment of the tightening strap flexes a bend portion of the splint that spans between the first and second portions and stretches the wearer’s plantar fascia.

42. The method of claim 41, wherein adjusting the tightening strap comprises pulling a distal end of the tightening strap and securing the distal end to the tightening strap.

43. The method of claim 42, wherein the distal end is secured to the tightening strap by engaging a hook and loop mechanism.

44. The method of claim 42, wherein pulling the distal end comprises pulling the distal end towards the first portion of the splint.

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