

Thomas' story



“I had Talipes surgery when I was a child.”

My diagnosis

- Clubfoot discovered at birth
- Part of life

I had the first of four operations when I was five and the last one was before I turned seven years old.

One foot had 3 operations, the other just one.
I received treatment from a few months old.

It was just part of early life as opposed to a specific realisation that I was born with Talipes.



My childhood

- Never felt different
- Able to be sporty



From the last operation until I was in my early 20s I didn't think much about the clubfoot treatments, apart from my legs being a bit imbalanced, bigger quadriceps (the muscles on the front of the thigh) and thinner lower calf/ankle. I believe the operations and casts impacted muscle growth around my ankles and led me to compensate elsewhere.

I was able to fully take part in all sports and activities, aside from when I had the cast on post operations.

Whilst I think my feet meant I wasn't a top level footballer, I played happily in school teams (and now with my kids). I especially enjoyed swimming and racket sports.

Adulthood

- **Backpain getting worse**
- **Became less active**



I am lucky that I never really had pain in my feet or ankles at any point, so I've never thought of myself as an adult with clubfoot, just a child who had a pretty successful treatment for it. However, I had a long series of lower back & upper back injuries in my 20s and early 30s, playing hockey, squash, running, and also during just mundane tasks like reaching into a drawer.

In my early 20s, I swam on and off, which helped, but I had periods of inactivity, mainly due to prioritising work as this was also around the time I started to spend long hours sitting in front of computer screens for office work. Gradually my “short bouts” of back pain began to hang around for longer and longer, with a significant amount of sciatica in both of my legs, especially when sitting down.

I was sent for MRIs (magnetic resonance imaging, which looks at structures inside the body), but they showed no cause for the pain I was experiencing.

Looking for a back pain solution

- Tried everything
- Getting tighter

I tried chiropractor therapy, physiotherapy, sports massage, and steroid injections but the relief I felt from each treatment I received became shorter and shorter, certain exercises I was given made the pain much worse.

I became more and more limited in my tolerance to exercise (apart from swimming), even just sitting in a chair became very uncomfortable at times. It's not clear that my feet were causing these issues but, I doubt they helped. My feet likely influenced the uncorrected tightness in my legs, hamstrings, calves etc, all of which contributed to the back issues.

I went down a lot of dead ends looking for a “cure”, including a period where an American doctor just prescribed stronger and stronger pain killers and anti-inflammatory medication.



What has worked for me

Stretching

At some point I was referred to a different kind of back pain physio who concentrated on flexibility and muscle length, especially hamstrings. He was adamant that I had to do the work myself or I wasn't going to get better. My hamstrings were extremely tight and I could barely reach the middle of my shins in the first appointment. I started stretching, one leg at a time, lying against a wall, both before and after work. It took a while but I did start to feel benefits every time I stretched.



Personalised Exercise

The next important step was a different physio who directed me in doing specific gym work, I couldn't believe how impactful this was on my symptoms. He barely gave me any actual physio treatment and I would walk out feeling much better.



What has worked for me

Pilates

Pilates seemed to provide a balance between mobility and strength so I started doing it twice a week (and my daily hamstring stretches). There are different approaches to Pilates and I went to a lot of different classes/practitioners as I moved around for work. For me, picking the right one was simple: if it was boring I didn't go back and I found a new one.

Rehab doesn't have to be dull, with the right guidance I could push myself and deal with my weaknesses all in the same session.



Swimming

Regular swimming was the other piece of the jigsaw for me.

I always felt better after a swim!

My life now

- I've come a long way



It didn't feel natural to think that physically challenging my body could improve a problem, but it's 100% what I needed.



In recent years I have been able to push myself to become the fittest and strongest I have ever been.

Deadlifts and squats seemed an impossibility when I could barely bend over to pick up a pencil, but by trial and error (and finding the right advice) I have built my body up to the point where I can really challenge myself. I haven't had any sort of regular treatment, or medication, for years but I do make sure to keep up all my routines.

Thomas' top tips

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Given my experience, I believe that activity (particularly strengthening and mobilising), paired with the correct advice and medical investigations, is the solution for back pain. Many physiotherapists I have met now focus the majority of their time on strength and active rehab, including weights and calisthenic (movements which focus on strength and control) type exercise. Rather than my previous experience of physiotherapists using only manual manipulation and low-level repetitive exercises.

My top tips are what I still do to manage my condition:

1. Routine

You cannot go from 0-100% on core exercise, weights or cardio. But, you can commit 100% to a routine and build through time. The progression can be part of the enjoyment.

I have a set of exercises I do every morning regardless of where I am, whether I am tired or not, on holiday or not! If I'm busy, 20 minutes is enough. I do active hamstring stretches (using a stretchy blue resistance band) and core strength via Pilates-style rollbacks, and sit-up-style exercises. You do not need anymore equipment than a mat and a band, even these simple exercises can be progressed to be challenging by changing reps, leg and arm positions. (If there's no mat a towel will do, if I forgot my band another towel or a wall will do, it's critical to put away easy excuses). With more time I add more rotation and strength moves.

Thomas' top tips

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2. Active stretches

I keep stretches as active movements, rather than static holds (holding a single position), avoiding the temptation to zone out and losing an hour without feeling improvement. Losing this time can make you think you don't have time to get your exercises done, your motivation can reduce and the routine disappears. It took me quite a while to refine what worked for me, I've gone through many iterations.

3. Cardio that you like.. with people you like

Find a cardiovascular exercise, i.e. one that gets your heart rate up, which you like and get into a routine with it, the endorphins your body releases can provide real motivation. For me twice a week Pilates (I found once a week was never enough) and as much swimming as I could fit in were ideal starting points. They allowed me to build up my load (how much, how fast, how often etc..) at my own pace. These are both activities which can start relatively easy and become very challenging. Exercise is more fun with people, find a friend or get into a class. If you can, get some personalised training.

4. "Standard Treatments" are not for everyone

For me, hands on treatment and painkillers were only ever useful for acute problems, they never provided me with a long-term solution. At the time I felt they masked some symptoms but in reality when I used them in isolation, they were making me go backwards. Keep looking for what does work for you and, if one thing doesn't, then there are other solutions out there.

How Steps helps

“I would encourage anyone to keep looking for improvement.

I was told I was a lost cause in my twenties, but I found what worked, and continues to work, for me.”

Did Thomas’ story make you think of your own? Would you like to hear more from adults who were treated for clubfoot in childhood? Are you looking for more resources on Talipes / Clubfoot? If so, then visit the Steps website and our Youtube page, or get in touch and share your own experience with others.



steps

We don't take walking for granted

Visit www.stepsworldwide.org for more information on Clubfoot and how Steps can help

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