

# Putting the Freeze on Painful Feet

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**Times Herald-Record**

March 15, 2006

For Carol Young, victory is a black shoe with a modest heel. Leaving her final appointment recently at Hudson Valley Foot Associates in Kingston, the Ulster County resident holds out her left foot, proudly showing off a harmless-looking women's shoe. Wearing this same innocuous footwear just a month ago would have caused her immeasurable amounts of pain.

Young was suffering from a condition known as plantar fasciitis, the most common cause of heel pain. The 63-year-old had tried conservative treatments such as cortisone shots for her ailing left foot – to no avail.



"I was miserable," says Young, summing it all up.

What ended her suffering just a little more than a month ago was a pain-alleviating treatment known as cryoanalgesia, which has roots in areas such as chronic pain management, but has been applied to podiatry only in the past few years. It's a minimally invasive procedure that uses cold temperatures – delivered via a thin probe – to kill troublesome nerve endings in cases of plantar fasciitis and Morton's neuroma (pinched nerves in the forefoot that cause burning pain and trouble walking).

"It was the best surgery I've ever had," says Young, who shows no signs of ever having had foot problems.

Physicians are also impressed.

"I've been practicing for 23 years, and this the first major advance in foot surgery in 10 years that has totally removed the need for open surgery," says Dr. Douglas Tumen, a board-certified podiatrist and founding partner of Hudson Valley Foot Associates. Last summer, his practice obtained a machine with which to perform the procedure – the Cryostar Cryoanalgesia System.

Regular surgery to treat the pain meant hospitals, anesthesiologists, stitches and longer recovery times. “But now with the Cryostar, the problem can be taken care of in an office setting,” says Tumen, who notes that the procedure is covered by most insurances.

After giving the patient local anesthesia to stave off any discomfort, a small probe the size of a pen is inserted into the painful area. The probe freezes the treatment area, bringing the nerve tissue down to minus 79 C, which forms an ice ball around the painful nerve. The freezing lasts three minutes, followed by a 30-second thaw. A few of these cycles are performed to ensure pain sensors are killed by the cold. The nerve itself is spared and still functional. The probe is then removed, a small dressing applied, and the patient is free to put his shoes back on and head out. All in all, the procedure takes no more than 15 minutes.

“We’ll see patients about two weeks after, and half of them are reporting the pain is gone and they’re back to their normal activities,” Tumen says. For the others, it may take another two to four weeks for the nerve to completely desensitize.

Overall, Tumen estimates the success rate among his patients has been about 80 percent. And for those cases that just don’t respond, surgery is still an option.

So how many pain-free days can patients look forward to?

When doctors first started using the Cryostar for foot pain, they thought it might provide temporary relief. But after looking at his own patients and talking with other doctors, what Tumen’s finding is that it’s permanent.