

Arthritic elephant finds relief in a pair of enormous Teva sandals

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The National Zoo's Shanthi shows off her new shoes, slipped on with the help of elephant keeper Deborah Flinkman. The National Zoo

WASHINGTON, D.C. — If you think your feet hurt after a long day standing around, imagine weighing 9,000 pounds. That would give you something to think about.

That's the situation that Shanthi, a 41-year-old Asian elephant at the National Zoo in Washington, D.C., finds herself in. Shanthi suffers from arthritis, a joint disease that can make getting around painful. It has also led to problems in Shanthi's front feet, including cracks in her toenails and sores on her skin.

The answer: Washington's largest pair of Teva-brand sandals.

Actually, they are more like boots, made especially for Shanthi in about a size 20, with an EEEEEEEEEEEEEEE width. They were sitting on a table in the zoo's Elephant Community Center recently. A single boot resembled a rubber birdbath.

Elephant Foot Care

Elephants have five toenails on their front feet and usually four on their back feet. An elephant foot can be close to 20 inches across when it's resting on the ground. Its foot is 6 inches smaller when the elephant lifts it up and takes the weight off of it.

"We put a lot of attention into elephant feet," said Tony Barthel, who is in charge of the zoo's Elephant Trails and Cheetah Conservation Station exhibits. "It's one of the things we can do to help ensure that they're healthy."

That foot care includes regular inspections, pedicures and occasional X-rays.

Zoo veterinarians needed to treat Shanthi's arthritis with injections and they rubbed treatments on her nails and skin. It was important that dirt be kept out of the cracks in her feet.

This all posed a challenge, especially keeping the medicine on long enough to work. Elephants are intelligent and curious and have flexible trunks well-suited for unwrapping bandages. Boots had been used successfully at other zoos, so the National Zoo decided to give them a try.

Teva's Special Order

There is no good way of measuring an elephant's foot, so a 3-D scan of her feet was sent to Teva in California.

The footwear company already had experience with interesting jobs. It made a pair of elephant shoes in 2004, and in 2011, it created a tiny sandal for the Santa Barbara Zoo, where a Humboldt penguin named Lucky had a problem foot.

Chris Hillyer works for Deckers Brands, which owns Teva. He flew to China to oversee the making of the shoes, which Teva donated to the zoo for free.

What does Shanthi think of wearing shoes?

At first, Barthel said, it was like when you "put a sock on a dog and they don't know how to walk," he said. "She was very careful about how she walked. That was an important part of the learning process."

Now Shanthi takes the boots in stride.

The Boots Are A (Huge) Success

The arthritis treatment seems to be working. The swelling in her left foot has eased. Zookeepers have to stuff some foam in the boot to make it fit, and Shanthi is more mobile and unafraid to amble down a steep incline into the pools, where she plays and rolls around.

"We've given her a good quality of life and improved her level of comfort," said Don Neiffer, the zoo's chief veterinarian.

On a recent afternoon, Deborah Flinkman, an elephant keeper, knelt at Shanthi's feet, separated from the elephant by bars. The world's largest land mammal can be dangerous, after all.

"If she stood a foot away, I wouldn't be able to do it," Flinkman said.

But Shanthi was standing up close, encouraged by Flinkman's calm words and light touch. She also liked the apple-flavored fiber biscuits Flinkman offered.

At just the tap of Flinkman's finger on a wrinkly gray toe, Shanthi lifted her left foot. The elephant keeper slid a boot under it, and Shanthi stepped down.

"Perfect," Flinkman said. "What a good girl."

She fastened the shoe and said "Over," asking the elephant to rotate 180 degrees and present her right foot. This Shanthi did, pausing only to lazily grab some hay with her trunk.

Shanthi lifted her right foot, then, like Cinderella after the ball, gingerly stepped into the boot.

Many parents have more trouble getting a squirming toddler into a pair of sneakers.