
Choosing the right shoe

Summary

- The right shoe can help keep your feet healthy and your body safe from injury.
 - Shoes should cushion and support your feet, feel comfortable and fit well.
 - Shop for shoes when your feet are at their largest – at the end of the day or after exercise.
 - Get your feet measured every time you buy shoes – it is common for one foot to be larger than the other, and your foot size and shape can change as you age.
 - If you play a sport, choose a shoe designed for that sport.
 - Talk with a healthcare professional (such as a podiatrist or physiotherapist) about any problems with your feet or footwear.
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The right **footwear** can help keep your feet healthy, make your physical activity easier and help keep your body safe from **injury**.

You will be more comfortable being active if you choose a shoe that fits you well, suits your activity type, is appropriate for any problems with your feet, and helps protect your feet, legs and joints.

What the right shoe can do for you

The right shoe:

- **cushions the foot** – the midsole is the main part of the shoe that provides cushioning. Surprisingly, shoes don't reduce the force that goes through the body all that much. But they do increase the time taken for that force to apply, so the body has time to adapt
- **supports the foot** – your shoe should aid the alignment of your foot when it touches the ground
- **feels comfortable** – your shoe should feel immediately comfortable from the first wear
- **fits well** – make sure you have at least 1–1.5cm at the end of the shoe. It should be wide enough and long enough to fit your feet. The shoe should feel snug but not tight.

How to choose the right shoe

Try to buy your athletic shoes from a specialty store. The staff may advise you on the type of shoe you need for your activity or sport. And they can properly fit the shoes so you end up with the right size.

- Shop for shoes after exercise or at the end of the day. This will help make sure that shoes feel comfortable when your feet are at their largest.
 - Try the shoes wearing the same type of sock that you will wear for the activity.
 - Have the shop assistant measure your feet every time you buy shoes, because your feet may become larger and wider as you age. It's also common for one foot to be slightly bigger than the other.
 - Check that you can wiggle all your toes when wearing the shoes. Remember, you need room for your foot to move within the shoe as you walk or run.
 - The shoes should be comfortable as soon as you try them on. Don't rely on 'breaking them in'.
 - Walk or run a few steps in your shoes, to check they are comfortable.
 - Make sure the shoes grip your heel. Your heel should not slip in the shoes when you move.
 - Think about width as well as length. If the ball of your foot feels squashed, ask if the shoe comes in a wider size. Shoes that are a half-size larger — but not wider — may not help.
 - Feel the inside of the shoes to check for tags, seams, or other material that might irritate your foot.
 - Examine the soles. Are they sturdy enough to protect against harmful objects? Do they provide appropriate
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grip? Try to walk on both carpet and hard surfaces.

If you play a sport, it's a good idea to wear shoes designed for that sport. There are specific shoes designed for tennis, golf, soccer, football, netball, running, cycling and other sports. Each has a different design, material and weight to best protect feet against the stresses of the particular activity.

A good tip when buying shoes is to take a tracing of your foot with you. If a shoe is narrower or shorter than the tracing, don't even try it on.

Walking versus running

If you need shoes for **walking**, look for a lightweight shoe and extra shock absorption in the heel and under the ball of your foot. These features may help reduce heel pain, and burning or tenderness in the ball of your foot. Some walkers prefer a rounded or rocker bottom on the shoe so they can easily shift weight from heel to toe.

If you need **shoes for running**, and prefer a traditionally styled shoe, look for overall shock absorption and good torsional strength (meaning the shoe shouldn't twist easily). These features may help protect against shin splints, tendonitis, heel pain, stress fractures and other overuse injuries.

Alternatively, you may prefer a **barefoot (minimalist) shoe**. These shoes allow your foot to land on the ground almost as if you were running barefoot: they do little more than provide grip and protect you against harmful objects on the ground. Some are designed to help you transition from heel-first running to barefoot style running (where the midfoot or forefoot strikes the ground first).

How shoes affect your feet, legs and joints

If your shoes are too tight, too loose or insufficiently supportive, your physical activity may place stress on your feet, ankles, lower legs and other joints. This ongoing pressure may contribute to pain and injuries.

Poor footwear choice can contribute to common sports injuries such as shin splints and Achilles tendon pain, corns and bunions, ingrown nails, or postural issues and lower back pain. Such injuries may significantly limit or stop your activity.

Choosing the right shoes can help avoid injury. Learn what can happen when you wear the wrong shoes:

- The chance of injury can be increased if your shoes are not designed for your activity, the conditions, or suited to your body mass or foot mechanics. As an example, there are different requirements for beach versus road running.
- Wearing the wrong shoe can exacerbate existing problems such as pain or arthritis in your hips, knees, ankles or feet.
- Even a short duration in the wrong shoes can cause stress and pain to your bones and joints, and the soft tissues that support them. For example, if you regularly stand for long periods of time as part of your job.
- Your shoes can make a significant impact on the way you walk, or your gait. The movement of your feet during each step affects how the rest of your body follows. When you step correctly, your heel makes contact with the ground first. Then, the arch rolls inward a little, allowing the ball of the foot and then the big toe to make contact. The heel then comes off the ground, which allows you to push off from the ball of your foot and big toe.
- Some people's arches roll inward too much, or not enough – either of which can impact how effectively your feet absorb shock. This can contribute to additional stress on other joints.
- Some shoe types, including high heels and flip flops ('thongs'), aren't suited to activity.

Remember, the right shoe can help prevent, reduce or eliminate foot pain. A lack of pain has a huge impact on how well and easily you move. So, find the right shoe and get active!

Shoe supports for problem feet

If you have foot or ankle problems, you may need to change shoes, make some changes to your existing shoes or use various shoe supports.

Heel cup

A heel cup may alleviate pain beneath the heel. Made of plastic, foam or rubber, the cup may provide support around the heel while relieving pressure beneath the tender spot.

Arch supports (orthoses)

Arch supports ('orthoses') treat pain in the foot and other problems related to function of the foot and lower leg. Made of many types of material, arch supports are worn inside the shoe. Custom arch supports are specially designed inserts (orthoses) and may relieve a particular area while supporting other areas. They may also aim to alter foot alignment and function.

Some foot problems can be improved by stretching and strengthening exercises, wearing a different shoe, or simple over-the-counter shoe modifications. However, long-term and complicated problems – such as severe flat foot, high arches, shin splints, Achilles tendon injury and turf toe – may require specialised assessment.

Metatarsal pad

A metatarsal pad can be used to relieve pressure or pain beneath the ball of the big toe (sesamoiditis) or other toes. Made from a range of materials, the pad affixes to the insole behind the tender area. In this way, the pad helps distribute pressure that would otherwise be placed on the ball of the foot.

Talk with a healthcare professional (such as a **podiatrist** or physiotherapist) about any problems with your feet or footwear. They may be able to recommend a treatment to help your symptoms, or a specialist shop that has shoes suitable for you.

Where to get help

- Podiatrist
- Physiotherapist
- Specialty athletic shoe shop

This page has been produced in consultation with and approved by:

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