

Choosing the Right Athletic Shoe

With all the marketing hype and countless styles and companies, how do you know which shoe is best for you? As a sports medicine specialist, I get asked a lot of questions about what shoes to wear. In an effort to cut through the shoe frenzy, here's a few general concepts that may be helpful for those of you who are engaged in running or other sports activities. Keep in mind that shoe fitting is not as much a science as is often assumed.

Rule number one is comfort. Don't hope for a break-in period since the only thing you'll break is the skin on your new blisters. Individuals have a variety of factors to consider, not the least of which is comfort. Keep in mind that even if you seem to fit a certain category for foot-type or activity, you will often have to experiment with a variety of shoes that meet your general criteria before you finally arrive at the appropriate shoe.

One of the most important parts of a shoe is the toe-box. The toe box and vamp cover the toes and part of the foot, providing protection for both the toes and forefoot. Preferably, the construction has as few seams as possible. When the toe box is too small, irritation may result in damage to toenails (i.e. black toenails) or irritate/initiate bunion formation.

The lacing and tongue are crucial for proper fit and upper foot cushioning. A standard rule is that when laced up, the eyelets should be about an inch apart. If the shoe is too wide, the eyelets spread apart beyond this range. If the shoe is too narrow, the eyelets diverge.

The back of the "upper" is the heel counter. This looks and acts like a cup for your heel. A soft heel counter provides little support, which may lead to ankle injuries. A firm heel counter prevents spreading of the fat pad of the heel. This is particularly helpful in thinner and older individuals who may have a thin fat pad (fat pad syndrome is often the cause of heel pain in individuals misdiagnosed with plantar fasciitis).

With regards to fit there are some common recommendations: Make sure that while standing there is about a half inch or one thumbnail (like mom always did) between the longest toe and the end of the toe box. The shoe should bend at the ball of the foot; too little flexibility leads to plantar fasciitis and Achilles' tendon strain. Leather stretches and gives more support than nylon, and nylon breathes more and is easier to wash. For people whose feet require it and for those involved in activities such as aerobics, basketball and racquet sports, you'll be better off with the added stability that leather offers.

Those of you involved in aerobics, basketball and racquet sports, will want to test the shoe for good torsional support which is simply done by twisting the shoe while holding with both hands.

In general, running shoes should be retired after 200-400 miles. This averages between 4-9 months for most runners. For a great list of brand-name shoes rated by category check out the Runner's World Shoe Buyer's Guide on American On-Line; Keyword: Runner's World.

In summary, all feet need shoes with a spacious toe-box and as few seams as possible. Check the width of the shoe by lacing it up, checking that the eyelets are about an inch apart. Be sure there is a firm heel counter and check to be sure the shoe bends at the ball of the foot. Finally, mom's old rule of about a half inch or one thumbnail (when standing) between the longest toe and the end of the toe box is still a good one. Happy shoe hunting.

Yours in health,

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