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Wellness Tip: Select Properly Fitting Athletic Shoes

By Angela Kargus

Many people choose fashion over function when purchasing athletic shoes. Because footwear is important for musculoskeletal function—especially for athletes and others who spend a lot of time on their feet—choosing the right shoe can help prevent pain in the back, hips, knees, and feet. The following points will help you choose properly fitting athletic shoes.

Find the Right Shoe

- Choose your athletic shoes carefully. There is no such thing as the *best* shoe, as every pair of feet is different and overall comfort is a very personal decision.
- For people with normal feet, stability shoes with a slightly curved shape are usually recommended.
- If you have flat feet, consider motion-control or high-stability shoes with firm midsoles, which don't twist or bend easily. Stay away from highly cushioned, highly curved shoes.
- For those with high-arched feet, the best choice is flexible, cushioned shoes. Avoid purchasing motion-control or stability shoes, which reduce foot mobility.

Shoe Purchasing Tips

- Match the shoe to the activity. Running shoes are primarily made to absorb shock as the heel strikes the ground. In contrast, tennis shoes provide more side-to-side stability. Walking shoes allow the foot to roll and push off naturally during walking, and they usually have a fairly rigid arch, a well-cushioned sole and a stiff heel support for stability.
- If possible, shop at a specialty store. Employees at these stores are often trained to recommend a shoe that best matches your foot type and stride pattern.
- Shop late in the day or after a workout, when your feet are at their largest. Wear the type of socks you usually wear during exercise, and if you use orthotic devices for postural support, make sure you wear them when trying on shoes.
- Have your feet measured every time. Foot size often changes with age, and most people have one foot that is larger than the other. Measure your feet while standing in a weight-bearing position because the foot elongates and flattens when you stand, affecting the measurement and the fit of the shoe.
- Choose shoes for their fit, not by the size you've worn in the past. The shoe should fit with an index finger's width between the end of the shoe and the longest toe. The toe box should not feel tight. The heel of your foot should fit snugly against the back of the shoe without sliding up or down as you walk or run. Keep the shoe on for 10 minutes to make sure it remains comfortable.
- Once you have purchased athletic shoes, don't run them into the ground. Once shoes show wear, especially in the cushioning layer, they also begin to lose their shock absorption. Worn shoes may cause injuries like shin splints, heel spurs, and plantar fasciitis.

Correct with Orthotics

- Feet are to the skeletal system what a foundation is to a house. If the foot has a structural abnormality, the body must compensate—often to the detriment of the legs, low back, or other areas.
- To correct an abnormal or irregular walking pattern, consider custom-designed shoe inserts, called orthotics. They alter the angle at which the foot strikes the ground, improving foot function, and often reducing pain.

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