

Newsletter

February 2005

How to Buy Athletic Shoes

Lloyd Nesbitt, DPM (The Physician and Sportsmedicine Vol.27 No.12 Nov 1999)

Although the right pair of athletic shoes may not enhance sports performance, it might help you avoid discomfort or even injury. Here are tips about what to look for in your next pair.

How do I know when it's time to replace my old athletic shoes?

Place your old shoes on a table or other flat surface and look at them from the back. If they lean inward or outward or show signs of excessive wear like badly worn edges of the sole, it's probably time for a new pair. Even if they look like they're in good shape, if you've logged 500 or more miles in them, or if you start to notice pain in your feet, ankles, legs or knees though you haven't changed your exercise routine, worn-out shoes may be a factor.

After you buy new shoes, go to the store and try on a new pair of that same model about every 4 to 6 months, depending on the extent of your activity. You may not realize how much your shoes have worn until you compare them with a new pair.

There are so many styles and brands—where do I start?

If your old shoes lean inward your feet are flat or tend to roll inward when you walk or run, you should look for shoes with added support under the arch. If your shoes lean outward or your arches are high, you need plenty of cushioning.

The shoe's material should be flexible and allow your foot to "breathe," as shoes that have mesh fabric do. Most people like the feel of a softer shoe, but with the pressure on shoes during exercise, a softer shoe may not last as long as a firmer one.

Think about protection from injuries. Shoes don't have to be very heavy to offer good support. Also, thin or flimsy shoes like canvas sneakers can worsen some problems such as calf or Achilles tendon pain. A shoe whose heel compresses too easily can overstretch your calf. In addition, soles that bend at the ball of the foot, not under the arch, offer better support.

Styles change about every 19 months, and you may not like the new version of your favorite model of shoe. If this happens, a knowledgeable salesperson should be able to help you find a style of athletic shoe comparable to your old favorite.

Regardless of the style, fit is the most important consideration. No matter how good you hear a shoe is, if it doesn't fit you or you're not comfortable with it, don't buy it. No one brand will fit everyone's needs.

How can I get the best fit?

No matter where you go to buy your shoes, try to find a knowledgeable salesperson who understands footwear and will take the time to guide you to the best style and size for you.

Try to shop at the end of the day or after a workout when your feet are generally at their largest. Wear the type of socks you usually wear during exercise, and if you use orthotic devices (orthoses) for your feet, make sure you wear them when you're trying on shoes.

Choose shoes for their fit, not by the size you've worn in the past. It's important to have both the length and width of your feet measured every time you shop for shoes, since foot size often changes with age.

There should be a thumbnail's width (about ½ inch) between the longest toe and the end of the shoe on your longer foot. Be sure to have the salesperson check the fit of both shoes for you when you are standing up. If you bend over to check it yourself, you will change the position of your foot in the shoe.

The widest part of your foot should be in the widest part of the shoe. The sides of your foot should not extend over the sole of the shoe, and your foot shouldn't move from side to side inside the shoe.

After you've found a pair that you think fits well, walk or run a little in the store, some stores even have a treadmill for that purpose. The shoes should feel comfortable snug—not tight or too loose—and you should not feel the stitching or seams on the inside of the shoes. Note also whether your toes slide forward or feel pinched together or your heel rises out of the shoe slightly.

Should I buy a shoe designed for my sport?

If you participate in a sport more than three times a week, you should consider a sport-specific shoe. Running shoes are primarily made to absorb shock as the heel strikes the ground. Tennis shoes, in contrast, provide more side-to-side stability. Walking shoes allow the foot to roll and push off naturally during walking. They usually have a fairly rigid arch, a well-cushioned sole, and a stiff heel support for stability.

How much should I pay for athletic shoes?

Most people don't need top-of-line models or shoes that cost more than \$150. The best values are usually in the middle-to upper-middle price ranges. Beginning exercisers should buy high-quality shoes in this range because their bodies are less adapted to the stress of exercise.

How should I take care of my new shoes?

Let shoes air dry between uses. You can even alternate pairs to ensure thorough drying. Because the insoles in most shoes are made for immediate comfort, not extended use, they often break down quickly. When your original insoles wear through, extend the shoe's life by replacing them with off-the-shelf insoles.

Can my shoes affect my sports performance?

Although a high quality, well-fitted athletic shoe might make your workout easier, it probably won't fix a mechanical problem with your feet or legs. If you have foot, ankle, or leg pain, a foot imbalance may be at fault, which may be corrected by wearing custom orthoses. Consult a physician or podiatrist who specializes in athletic injuries.

Buying Children's Shoes

Parents often lament the high cost of children's shoes. If you think about it, though, your kids walk and run hundreds of miles every few months on growing feet. So consider spending a bit more for quality running shoes, rather than thin-soled canvas ones. The same workmanship that goes into adults' athletic shoes goes into children's sizes, offering solid support, cushioning and long wear.

Follow the same guidelines for choosing children's athletic shoes as for an adult. Children need good cushioning, support and protection and shoes should not squeeze their growing feet. It's OK to allow some growing room, but the heel should not slip up and down and the forefoot should not move side to side in the shoe.

If you buy shoes with Velcro closures, get the best quality shoes available so that stability is not compromised. When buying dress shoes for boys or girls, consider that they may do lots of running around in them. A dress shoe with a rubber sole might be a good option. The key is to avoid shoes that have rigid soles.

Babies who haven't started walking don't need shoes—just socks and slippers for warmth. High-topped shoes give a sense of stability when kids first start walking, but toddlers generally don't need to wear shoes in a safe environment like inside the home. When it's time to buy shoes, remember that new shoes are best. Individualized wear patterns in hand-me-down shoes can place undue stress on a child's feet.

Remember: This information is not intended as a substitute for medical treatment. Before starting an exercise program, consult a physician.

Dr. Nesbitt is a podiatrist in private practice in Toronto.