

Shoe criteria

What to look for in a comfy shoe

In a perfect world, we would be able to walk barefoot regularly with exposure to varying terrain. Grass, dirt, rocks, sand—our foot has evolved with many small bones, articulating joints, thicker skin and highly sensitive nerves that sense these varied surfaces and textures of the ground underneath us and allow us to make small adjustments to our body position so we can fluidly and effortlessly walk or run over these surfaces.

Some have suggested that shoes themselves are the root of the problem. However, while there are certainly some shoes that are not ideal for long-term use (think high heels, or any shoes with pointy toes, for example), the reality is that many of us live in a world with flat surfaces. Paved paths and sidewalks, tiled and hardwood floors are ubiquitous. As such, our feet rarely get the exposure to varied surfaces that we crave and have evolved to walk and run on. Even the “best” feet will struggle if barefoot on these flat surfaces for an extended period of time.

If you are able to do so, I highly suggest exposing yourself to varied surfaces whenever possible. If you have not walked barefoot outside in a while, you may want to start with very short durations on softer surfaces, such as grass. Use your common sense here: your body needs time to adapt to something new, so start small and build over time. The benefits of bare feet on the earth extend beyond just the feet, but discussion of those benefits is beyond the scope of this article.

To be clear, I am not saying that shoes are bad or good, nor am I saying flat surfaces are bad or good. I generally steer clear of these simple binary distinctions. As is often the case, reality exists in shades of gray. Context matters.

Keep in mind that the body adapts to repeated use over time. In our modern world, I believe the best approach is one of variety. When it comes to shoes, minimize time at the extremes (i.e. wearing those high heels may be fine for a wedding, but all day every day for months or years may not serve you well in the long-run). Spend more time in shoes you find comfortable and allow your foot to do what a foot should do.

Which leads me to this guide and the criteria within. My hope is that you will use the criteria below to find a shoe that fits *you*. It is a general “every-day” shoe guide, and is not intended for sport-specific purposes (aside from perhaps running). It is not intended to fix, treat, or otherwise solve any medical conditions you may have. For those, seek out the advice of a qualified medical professional, preferably one knowledgeable in the feet as they relate to whole-body mechanics.

- **Your shoe and foot should feel like 1 unit.** There should be no slipping or sliding of your foot inside the shoe. It should fit snugly, but not too tight. Take the time to tie & untie your shoes when you put them on and take them off. Your feet will be happier, and it will extend the life of the shoe.
- **You should be able to sense your heels and arches as you stand in the shoe.**
- **The toe box should have enough room for you to wiggle your toes.** Shoes with a narrow toe box crowd the toes and thus limit free movement and good foot mechanics.
- **The toe box should bend where your foot naturally bends.**



- **The heel counter (the back part of the shoe where you slip your heel into) should not easily collapse when you squeeze from the sides or from the top.**



***A note on minimalist and/or “zero-drop” shoes.** First and foremost, I have nothing against minimalist shoes. If you spend time on varied surfaces, they may help protect your foot from “pointier” objects while still allowing you to sense the varied terrain under foot. “Zero drop” shoes may also afford you a similar sense of the ground underneath you. They may work well for those with average feet (not a high or low arch, no bunions or other toe malformations, and normal spacing between the toes).

However, if you spend the majority of your time on flat surfaces as mentioned in the intro, zero-drop shoes may not be the best shoes for you. This is particularly true if you have very high arches, arches that flatten when standing (commonly referred to as “flat” feet), bunions, or have had foot surgeries to insert rods or otherwise artificial rigid implants.

What about orthotics or other shoe inserts? Off-the-shelf inserts—ones that are not custom fit to *your* feet—may work fine for an average foot. I am neither for nor against these. Again, it depends on an individual’s foot needs. In my experience, I have found that through proper training and exposure to variety of surfaces, these off-the-shelf inserts are largely unnecessary.

However, if you are interested in orthotics, I do not recommend rigid plastic as these do not allow the foot to do what it needs to do while ambulating (i.e. change shape and sense the terrain under foot). Instead, your best bet is to seek out a movement professional who, again, is knowledgeable about feet and their relationship to whole-body mechanics.

To reiterate, this is only meant to be a guide, rather than hard and fast “rules” for shoe wear. I have found these criteria to be helpful not only to myself, but for many of my clients with varied foot shapes, movement profiles, and sport/activity levels. I hope you have found this guide helpful. If you have any thoughts or questions about this guide, feel free to contact me at chris@coachchrismullins.com.

Here’s to happy feet and a healthy, active lifestyle!

– Coach Chris