

Hit the ground running in the right shoes

By Susan Edmunds

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One of the most important but often overlooked things to get right before you start working out is your footwear. Your feet can absorb up to three times your bodyweight every time they hit the ground when you are running, affecting their delicate bones and tissue. Exercising in incorrect footwear can result in Achilles' tendon or shin problems.

Simon Speight, of Speight's Podiatry in Auckland, says people should ensure they are prepared before they start running – "Before they have to come to me for orthotics." He says there is some research around at the moment which indicates feet should be allowed to move as if the runner were barefoot – shoes such as the Nike Free are examples of designs incorporating this – but he prefers running shoes which offer some support.

Podiatrist Denise Lewins agrees barefoot running – or as close to it as you can get while protecting your feet – can work for people with a balanced foot and leg "but if you aren't perfect, running shoes help with stability and control".

Before you start shopping, determine whether you have flat arches, high arches or normal feet (see box). This affects the kind of support you need your shoes to give you. Go to a retailer who can give advice on the type of shoe you need. Speight says: "If you can afford it, go to one where they video you running."

It is normal for the foot to roll slightly inwards when it hits the ground, absorbing some of the shock. This is called pronation. Over-pronators (often people with flat feet) tend to roll their ankles markedly inwards with each stride, while under-pronators (often people with high arches) don't have enough movement in their ankles. If you over-pronate, go for shoes that offer support and motion control. If you under-pronate, look for shoes with extra cushioning to take the impact around the heel and ball of your foot.

Check out your existing running shoes to work out what kind of foot-striker you are. The wear pattern on your shoes should indicate which part of your foot you are landing on – you can then look for shoes with either more heel or more forefront cushioning. But beware of too much cushioning – some runners get into the habit of hitting the ground too hard because they have become reliant on the extra padding in the shoes. You should still be able to feel the ground and alter how your foot is landing, depending on the surface.

Go shopping for shoes late in the afternoon. Over the course of the day, your feet swell and can change shape. If you buy shoes first thing, you may find they are too tight when you come to wear them after a normal day's activity. Take your exercise socks with you when you try on shoes – these can affect the fit.

Get your shoes measured – buying the right size is the most important thing when it comes to getting a good fit.

Often you can get a narrow or wide fit, depending on the shape of your foot. If you are a woman with wide feet, consider trying some men's shoes. Spend a good amount of time in the shop walking or jogging around in them. Try on both shoes – a lot of people have one foot slightly smaller than the other. There should be



Your footwear is one of the most crucial factors to get right before you begin exercising. Photo / Thinkstock

space to move at the end of your longest toe. Don't settle for anything that does not feel completely comfortable.

Lewins says: "Basically, it all comes down to personal preference and what you like."

Start on the right foot

Wet one of your feet and stand firmly on a surface such as concrete, so that you leave a footprint.

- * If the print is full, with the arch clearly visible between your heel and the ball of your foot, you have flat arches.
- * If there's hardly any arch in the print and your foot almost looks like two separate bits, you have high arches.
- * If it's somewhere in between – with about half the arch visible – you have normal feet.

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