WHAT ARE THE BEST SHOES FOR PREVENTING FOOT PAIN?

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In general, the best shoes are well cushioned and have a leather upper, stiff heel counter, and flexible area at the ball of the foot. The heel area should be strong and supportive, but not too stiff, and the front of the shoe should be flexible. New shoes should feel comfortable right away, without a breaking in period.

Getting the Correct Fit

Well-fitted shoes with a firm sole and soft upper are the best way to prevent nearly all problems with the feet. They should be purchased in the afternoon or after a long walk, when the feet have swelled. There should be 1/2 inch of space between the largest toe and the tip of the shoe, and the toes should be able to wiggle upward. A person should stand when being measured, and both feet should be sized, with shoes bought for the larger-sized foot. It is important to wear the same socks as you would regularly wear with the new shoes. Women who are used to wearing pointed-toe shoes may prefer the feel of tight-fitting shoes, but with wear their tastes will adjust to shoes that are less confining and properly fitted.

The Sole

Ideally, the shoe should have a removable insole [*see* Insoles *below*]. Thin hard soles may be the best choice for older people. Elderly people wearing shoes with thick inflexible soles may be unable to sense the position of their feet relative to the ground, significantly increasing the risk for falling. Some research suggests that thick soles may even be responsible for foot injury in younger adults who engage in high-impact exercise.

The Heel

High heels are the major cause of foot problems in women. Although people believe that foot binding is a problem limited to Chinese women of the past, many fashionable high heels are designed to constrict the foot by up to an inch. One study suggests that wearing high heels may even lead to arthritis of the knee. Women who insist on high heels should at least look for shoes with wide toe room, reinforced heels that are relatively wide, and cushioned insoles. They should also keep the amount of time they spend wearing high heels to a minimum.

Laces

The way shoes are laced can be important for preventing specific problems. Laces should always be loosened before putting shoes on. People with narrow feet should buy shoes with eyelets farther away from the tongue than people with wider feet. This makes for a tighter fit for narrower feet and looser for wider. If, after tying the shoe, less than an inch of tongue shows, then the shoes are probably too wide. Tightness should be adjusted both at the top of the shoe and at the bottom. Where high arches cause pain, eyelets should be skipped to relieve pressure.

Breaking in and Wearing the Shoes

If shoes do require breaking in, moleskin pads should be placed next to areas on the skin where friction is likely to occur. Once a blister occurs, moleskin is not effective. Shoes should be changed during the day and rotated in their use. As soon as the heels show noticeable wear, the shoes or heels should be replaced.

Special-Purpose Footwear

People should avoid extreme variations between their exercise, street, and dress shoes.

Exercise and Sports. Shoes purchased for exercise should be specifically designed for a person's preferred sport. For instance, a running shoe should especially cushion the forefoot, while tennis shoes should emphasize ankle support. [*See* Shoes for Sports *below*.] Athletic socks are almost as important as shoes. Experts often recommend padded acrylic socks.

Occupational Footwear. Because a number of occupations put the feet in danger, workers in high-risk jobs should be sure their footwear is protective. For example, non-electric workers at

risk for falling or rolling objects or punctures should wear shoes with steel toes and possibly other metal foot guards. Electric workers should wear footgear with no metal parts (or insulated steel toes) and rubber soles and heels. Chemical workers should wear shoes made of synthetics or rubber, not leather.

Shoes for Sports

Aerobic Dancing	Sufficient cushioning to absorb shock and pressure, which should be many times greater than shock from walking. Arches that maintain side-to-side stability. Thick upper leather support. Box-toe. Orthotics may be required for people with ankles that over-turn inward or outward. Soles should allow for twisting and turning.
Cycling	Rigid support across the arch to prevent collapse during pedaling. Heel lift. Cross-training or combo hiking/cycling shoes may be sufficient for the casual biker. Toe clips or specially designed shoe cleats for serious cyclers. In some cases, orthotics may be needed to control arch and heel and balance forefoot.
Running	Sufficient cushioning to absorb shock and pressure. Fully bendable at the ball of the foot. Sufficient traction on sole to prevent slipping. Consider insole or orthotic with arch support for problem feet.
Tennis	Allows side-to-side sliding. Low-traction sole. Snug fitting heel with cushioning. Padded toe box with adequate depth. Soft-support arch.
Walking	Lightweight. Breathable upper material (leather or mesh). Wide enough to accommodate ball of the foot. Firm padded heel counter that does not bite into heel or touch anklebone. Low heel close to ground for stability. Good arch support. Front provides support and flexibility.

Correct Walking and Exercise

In addition to wearing proper shoes and socks, a person should also walk often and correctly to prevent foot injury and pain. The head should be erect, the back straight, and the arms relaxed and swinging freely at the side. A person should step out on the heel, move forward with the weight on the outside of the foot, and complete the step by pushing off the big toe.

Stretching. Gentle stretching and heel lifts after warm-up and before running can help prevent Achilles tendinitis and heel pain.

Hiking. A person should prepare for long hikes by putting moleskin pads on the heel and other parts of the foot that might be rubbed by the shoe. At the end of a hike, the foot should be checked for irritation and redness.