

LadySport

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FitFirst Footwear

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SHOES FOR WALKING

Walking shoes come in many different disguises. Some look and feel like a common casual shoe. They have simply been tweaked to market well to the destination walker who wants comfort, but needs the shoe to match their casual or work clothes. Others are hiking/outdoor walking styles geared to the off road enthusiast. As well, there are the exercise walking shoes, whose features are more athletically influenced. For the purpose of this discussion we will talk mainly about the athletic models. We will look at their features relative to another common choice, “the running shoe” for walking.

Walking vs Running

The walking gait differs from the running motion in one very distinct way. When you are walking, one foot is always on the ground. Whereas when running, you are air borne for a split second between the time one foot lands and the other one pushes off.

Therefore, when walking your impact at heel strike is significantly less than when jogging. While walking impact forces at ground contact are 1-2 times bodyweight, a runner generates peak forces from 3-5 times bodyweight. The cushioning and support features of a running shoe are therefore significantly greater than those found in the average walking model.

Consider Foot Mechanics

We shouldn't be too quick to accept less support or cushion when choosing a shoe to walk in. There is still a significant amount of torque and shock associated with exercise walking. This is particularly evident in an individual who has some gait issues such as excessive pronation. With both running and walking, the foot impacts the ground on the lateral heel, then rolls inwards towards the arch (i.e. pronates). It's here that the foot flattens out and the knee bends to absorb shock. In most cases, this motion is efficient and does a great job mechanically of attenuating shock while you walk or run. But, like most things, when done in excess, it can cause significant problems. If the foot excessively pronates, or it rolls in *too* much, structures like an ankle, a knee, or even the lower back are put into positions of misalignment.

Like the old saying goes...the ankle bone's connected to the shin bone, the shin bone's connected to the knee bone, etc... Everything begins at the foot or the point of contact, and works its way up the body.

Significant orthopaedic problems, like plantar fasciitis, shins splints, patellofemoral pain (knee hurts!), and iliotibial band syndrome, are closely tied to inappropriate pronation forces and poor shoe selection. Therefore, keeping the foot well supported is critical. Some walking shoes take issue with excessive pronation by offering harder materials on the arch or inside part of the shoe. Called “*medial posts*”, these restrictive devices come in the form of harder foams or plugs in the midsole of the shoe. These, along with rigid midfoot shanks and hard heel counters, help to support and control the foot during midstance and toe off.

Walking Shoes vs Running Shoes

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Designers of the casual style walking shoe have been slow to adopt these features into their footwear. Even athletic walking models rarely incorporate pronation control elements into the shoe. Designers often put it down to two things. First, they don't think that pronation control and cushioning are as important during walking. Second, too many bulky features may ruin the look of the shoe! *This design mentality often sells the walker short on technical design and cushioning.*

The running shoe, on the other hand, centers its design around features specific to foot and gait mechanics. Therefore, walkers with flat arches that pronate too much, or walkers with high rigid arched feet in need of maximum cushioning, may have better results using a technical running shoe for their walking!

Those individuals who are blessed with good feet and sound biomechanics can usually walk injury free in almost any shoe. From the casual style of a Rockport walking shoe to the athletic design of a New Balance, the choice will be mostly a matter of *fit and comfort*.

The more stylish walking shoe is a common choice for those who walk a great deal at work or on holiday. But finding a "brown" shoe with the key technical features demanded by the problematic foot can be difficult. Therefore, those with problem feet and people who walk for exercise will be served better by purchasing a well cushioned athletic walking or running shoe. These shoes come complete with strong heel counters, rigid midfoot shanks, cushioning and foot specific support features that you can tailor to your needs.

Those with bunions or a history of ball of the foot pain (metatarsalgia) due to neuromas or arthritis may get some relief from a stiffer, more rocker soled shoe (see The Shoe Update at www.ladysport.com). It's a good idea to analyze your current shoe and note whether they are stiff or flexible at the ball of the foot. Noting whether you manage better in a stiff shoe or a flexible one may be the key to identifying what makes your perfect walking shoe. Those who can walk for hours in their hiking boots may have intense pain and tired feet from a *flexible* athletic or casual shoe. At the same time, those who walk successfully in a runner may feel weighed down and poorly cushioned in a firm stiff sole.

Being Fit Properly

Manufacturers have analyzed and over analyzed the walking gait. They have identified some distinct differences in the gait patterns of running verses walking. The differences though do not preclude the use of a running shoe for walking. Even though heel strike position and impact forces differ between walking and running, your final choice should be based on your biomechanics and two final criteria...*fit and comfort*.

A good shoe fitter should cover a number of things before arriving at your final choice. He/she should ask you what you have successfully worn in the past. Deviating from what has worked, just to try something new, may be asking for trouble! They should identify any obvious anomalies in your gait or foot mechanics, determine your proper size and width and then provide you with some meaningful footwear options! Options that are tailored to your specific needs. After watching you walk in the shoes, and guiding you appropriately, it should come down to fit and comfort. ***If it doesn't feel good in the store...it likely won't feel good on the road!***

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Staying Dry

Many individuals are concerned with keeping their feet dry. If you are hindered by blisters, then keeping your socks dry is key to walking comfortably. In this case you may have to opt for a Gore-tex or water resistant shoe or boot. This type of upper retards water, while allowing the shoe to breathe. Be aware though that if the shoe doesn't breathe, and particularly if the socks are cotton, you may find yourself no further ahead than you would be in a breathable mesh runner that lets a little rain in.

A Final Thought

Keep in mind that shoes don't last forever! The rule of thumb is that after 500 miles of wear, the cushioning as well as the support of the shoe has been compromised. To put it in perspective: if you walk 3 times a week for an hour at a time that's about 10 miles a week, 40 miles a month, or about 500 miles a year. At 500 miles the shoe will feel flat and unsupportive compared to a new model. This may be the root cause of that slight ache in the arch or a recent tweak of the knee. Finally, as good preventative medicine, check to see if your foot and biomechanics are sound. Get fit by an experienced salesperson who knows about feet, shoes and the walking gait. Take the time, be prepared and keep your training on track!

CLOTHES FOR WALKING

When walking, each foot strikes the ground about 800 times per kilometer. The arms swing in rhythm with the feet. So when you think about it, that's a lot of body parts rubbing against each other, hundreds of times every outing. The clothing you wear, complete with seams and texture can get caught in between these passing limbs, setting up a perfect environment for chaffing and blisters. Add to this the fact that for every 2000 steps you take, you burn about 500 calories. Burning calories and expending energy builds up heat. Perspiring is your body's way of cooling itself down. Therefore, the clothing you wear, if not chosen properly, will absorb perspiration moisture and become wet. A wet garment, rubbing even lightly over sensitive areas of the body, will increase friction, resulting in abrasion and often blisters. Shirts, shorts, bras, undergarments, as well as socks, need to manage moisture and position seams appropriately to reduce chaffing.

Cotton can absorb up to 7 times its weight in water. The new synthetic nylons and polyesters will wick moisture away from the skin and through the garment, allowing it to dissipate into the air. With this dry garment next to your skin, you cut down on abrasion and increase comfort. As well, a dry base layer will help keep you warm in the winter and cooler in the summer.

To reduce chaffing, some socks are made in two layers (i.e. two socks in one). The conjoined socks then rub against one another reducing blisters by reducing friction against the skin.

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For those who walk significant distances, Vaseline, special anti-friction roll-ons, gel- like pads (ex. Second Skin) can help you manage those problem areas between the thighs, underarms, nipples and bra lines. Don't forget the importance of duct tape in problem areas, as it sticks better than anything else in damp conditions and is very slick and nonabrasive on the skin.

Managing the cold and the rain is a challenge for many "*non-fair-weather*" walkers. The key is to stay dry from the inside out, as well as the outside in. Keep a moisture wick layer against the skin, like Nike DryFit (proprietary names, there are lots) and then layer appropriately from there. If it's raining, the outer layer of clothing should be a water resistant, breathable garment like Goretex (again, a proprietary name). Avoid the rubber based closed-cell rain jackets that don't breathe. They are no better than wearing a garbage bag with a couple of arm holes cut out!

In the end, clothing should be comfortable and manage moisture well. Keeping all garments that lie next to the skin dry is the key to a long comfortable walk.