

Athletes go 'barefoot' with new shoe style

Written by Holyoke Enterprise

Barefoot runners, toe shoes or minimalist footwear may have different names, but they are essentially shoes that mimic the feel of walking on bare feet. Many people wonder if this type of footwear is harmful or helpful to their lower bodies.

Barefoot shoes have become quite popular. Minimalist shoes have only recently come onto the market, but they have quickly drawn quite a following.

Athletic shoes are a relatively recent addition to America's sporting culture. It was not until the 1970s that the athletic sneaker, or runner, became an essential component of modern-day footwear. These shoes have been modified and have evolved throughout the years to provide various forms of protection depending on the athletic activity they are used for. But there have been people who believe the bare foot provides all the support and assistance an athlete needs.

Many of today's outdoor surfaces contain debris and hazards that could cause injury to feet should someone run or walk without shoes. Barefoot shoes have entered the picture as a way to bridge the gap between barefoot athletics and foot safety.

Proponents of the shoes say they enable the foot to move the way it was designed to, which can help decrease the impact of certain activities on joints. Flatter soles and less padding enables the foot to move in multiple directions. Activating the small muscles and tendons in the foot could also make for a more effective workout.

However, some podiatrists say minimalist shoes may be less taxing on the joints, but they could cause other injuries. These problems may include bunions, tendinitis, hammertoes and even stress fractures. Although research is currently underway to compare injury rates between barefoot shoes and standard sneakers, there's no definitive data right now.

For those who want to try barefoot shoes, it is advisable to start slowly and gradually condition the feet for the way these shoes increase movement and flexibility. As with any new exercise or fitness modification, use of minimalist shoes should be slow and steady to reduce the risk of injury.

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