

Serious Sole Searching

What feels best on your feet will determine which running shoes you should purchase

by: Jill Barker

Buying a pair of running shoes can be complicated, complete with its own jargon and wide range of price points. If you've been running for a while, you've seen the industry go from hyping technology to hyping a lack of technology. Heels have gone from low to high, then high to low. Yet despite all the changes, the percentage of injured runners hasn't improved in the past 40 years.

Aren't shoes supposed to dampen the impact of pounding the pavement and reduce the wear and tear on a runner's body? Keep in mind that the traditional role of a running shoe was to protect the feet - not the joints - with little more than a rubber sole providing a barrier between bare feet and the road.

Now it's a multibillion-dollar industry that sells the promise of improved speed, comfort, running technique and fewer injuries.

In the 1970s, running shoes started to go mainstream with Brooks, Nike and New Balance all featuring models designed for the mass market. However, most runners were male and had competitive running experience, and shoe design reflected this small market of users.

The 1980s featured an explosion of recreational runners of all ages, shapes and sizes. Suddenly, the market was large enough that shoe companies started designing shoes beyond the needs of competitive runners. Added cushioning was the most highlighted feature of shoes in the '80s, but the suggestion that added technology could correct poor biomechanics and reduce the risk of injury started gathering steam.

By the 2000s, cushioning and technology were thought to contribute to - not reduce - injury, and minimalist shoes were all the rage. The idea that feet needed to work, not sit passively in a well-cushioned shoe, was touted as a way to reduce running related injuries.

What kind of shoes do the runners of today wear? First, it's worth noting that running in 2019 looks very different from running 50 years ago. Men no longer dominate local road races, with women making up just over 50 per cent of all runners. Today's runner is also considerably slower than the runners of the '70s and '80s, with the goal of finishing a race replacing the goal of winning a race.

When it comes to what shoes are on the feet of runners at starting lines across North America, there are more models on display than ever before.

Wander into a running shoe store and you're likely to be overwhelmed with the vast number of shoes for sale. You're also likely to be overwhelmed with the language surrounding shoes, including terms such as traditional, neutral, stability, cushioned, motion-control, minimalist, conventional, barefoot simulating, standard cushioning and partial minimalist.

So what do you look for in a shoe? Most of the recent studies evaluating shoes and running-related injuries claim that comfort, not technology, fashion or price tag, is a better measure of how well a shoe protects a runner from injury.

That seems like a simple statement until you consider that the perception of comfort varies considerably between runners.

Not to mention that runners come in all shapes and sizes and have their own technique, training routine, performance goals and history of injury, all variables that need consideration when finding the right shoe.

According to Benno Nigg, professor emeritus in the faculty of kinesiology at the University of Calgary, and one of the world's leading researchers in running shoes, a good shoe allows runners to find their own "preferred movement path." Studies have also suggested that when comfort is the primary guide to choosing a running shoe, running economy (less energy expended per stride) improves. For some runners, a cushioned shoe is their idea of comfort. For others, stability is a more welcoming feel. And then there are those who prefer a lighter, thinner minimalist shoe that puts the foot in closer contact with the ground.

So consider selecting your next pair of shoes by a blindfold test, choosing based solely on comfort; not price tag, brand name or style. Then go for a run and let your feet enjoy.

RUNNING SHOE LEXICON

Maximalist/cushioned Cushioned shoes have foam in the heels and forefoot for a plush bouncy feel. They typically have the raised heel characteristic of a traditional running shoe.

Motion control/stability Motion control or stability shoes have added technology, usually in the midsole, to brace the foot and limit excess foot roll. They are typically stiffer than minimalist or maximalist shoes.

Minimalist A highly flexible and lightweight shoe without any motion or stability control and very little cushioning built into the shoe. They have a low heel with the foot riding low to the ground.

Heel-to-toe drop The difference between the height of the heel and the height of the toe is known as the heel-to-toe drop. Traditional running shoes generally have a heel-to-toe drop of about eight millimetres, while minimalist shoes have a zero heel-to-toe drop.

© 2019 Postmedia Network Inc. All rights reserved.