

# Why walking barefoot can actually help your feet

Recent studies highlight the advantages of going barefoot and minimalist footwear, but experts advise a gradual transition to avoid injuries.



## PREMIUM SCIENCE

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The allure of moving naturally, with the potential for fewer injuries and stronger feet, has captivated runners and walkers for years. This fascination gained momentum when *Born To Run*, a book about long-distance barefoot runners in Mexico, sparked a global interest in a barefoot and minimalist lifestyle.

Now, over a decade later, a growing body of research continues to demonstrate that going barefoot or wearing minimalist shoes can help to restore foot strength, increase muscle size, and improve gait: In a 2021 study in *Nature*, participants wearing minimalist footwear increased their foot strength by an average of 57.4 percent over six months. The study also showed improved balance and a reduced risk of falls. Going barefoot is especially crucial for children, says Galahad Clark, seventh-generation cobbler and founder of minimalist footwear brand Vivobarefoot, as this period is when foot strike is established.

## **Modern vs. minimalist footwear**

“Our feet are actually really strong and resilient and can cope with the demands we place on them, but we don’t use them as nature intended,” says Rina Harris, a functional podiatrist based in London. “We have 33 joints in our feet, and [our feet] move on three different planes. So they’re meant to mold to the terrain we walk on. ” But modern footwear has restricted our natural movement patterns, affecting our gait and even the structure of our feet.

“Most modern shoes have quite a tapered toe box, which means our toes are scrunched together and you can’t really press down or engage your toes, therefore also engage your intrinsic foot muscles, ” Harris says. Additionally, cushioned midsoles reduce sensory input, making it harder to feel the ground beneath us. This may contribute to poor posture, reduced balance over time, and even arch collapse, leading to musculoskeletal issues.

While modern shoes have thick foam cushioning, narrow toe boxes, and a raised heel, barefoot-style shoes have flexible, thin outsoles, a wide toe box to encourage your toes to splay, and a zero-drop design that places your heel on the same level as your toes, just like you’re barefoot.

## **Transitioning to a barefoot lifestyle**

While the research about the barefoot movement is promising, don’t throw out all of your shoes just yet. Switching too quickly can be a recipe for injury, says John Mercer, professor of kinesiology and biomechanics researcher at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas.

Our feet have adapted to cushioned shoes, losing some of their innate strength. Plus, many of us are now hypersensitive to anything but smooth, soft ground (think about walking on gravel), so walking barefoot everywhere could be a painful endeavour.

Basically, you can’t just shed your shoes and break out into a jog: “That’s like having your arm in a sling or in a cast for years on end, ” says Clark. “Then take your cast off, and the first thing you do is go out and play a game of tennis. Of course, you’re going to hurt your arm if you do that. ” Transitioning too quickly can overload underused muscles and tendons, causing stress fractures, plantar fasciitis, and Achilles tendonitis. Mercer recommends starting slow.

First, try walking around the house and outside on a soft surface. Then, go for a short walk around the block. Increase the mileage slowly, adding a bit more each week. “Your feet will tell you when you’ve had enough,” says Harris, and if you experience any sharp pain, stop, says Mercer.

Proper footwear can help you with the shift, but when you first wear them, they'll feel different from any shoes you've tried. "They're going to feel too big for you because you have so much space in the toe box, " says Harris. With more use, they'll start to feel more natural. The sensation of the ground beneath you may feel strange, so your feet may fatigue more quickly. Harris recommends getting a spiky massage ball to stimulate your nerve receptors.

## **Should everyone go barefoot?**

Walking barefoot more often can help strengthen your feet, but just like any other fitness trend, the barefoot movement may not be for everyone. There is also no conclusive data about whether footwear choice impacts injury risk.

After studying everything from barefoot footwear to max-cushioned super shoes, Mercer's takeaway is that everyone should take a personalised approach. "Why is it great for one person and terrible for another? That's not fully understood, and we're still trying to tease that out, " he says.