

THE SPORTS DOCTOR - The Hoopla Over Barefoot Running

I've had many questions and inquiries about the pros and cons of barefoot running and the trend of "the less shoe the better".

Let's take a look at this – what makes sense and what doesn't. Since the running boom really got started over 35 years ago, there have been lots of studies on the role of running shoes, and tremendous advances in materials and components of shoes. All the major brands like Nike, New Balance, Adidas, Reebok and Acics to name a few have poured millions of dollars and countless hours of research into what would best protect runners and running, jumping athletes from all sorts of foot and lower leg problems. For the most part, I feel that they've done a good job. The shoes of today are far superior in all ways from support, motion control, stability and weight, to cushioning, traction and sizing. Emphasis on foot type variables like shoes for flat type over pronating feet or high arch supinated feet have continued to improve. I don't know how many articles I've written or radio show topics we've had where the advice "know your foot type and mechanics and choose the proper shoe" have been stressed. Now we're seeing all types of minimalistic shoes doing little more than covering your feet soar in popularity do to some over hyping in books and articles of less shoe is better and "natural running barefoot".

I've always recommended to athletes, runners and non-runners alike to strengthen their feet and ankles! (Go to Sportsdoctorradio.com/newspaper articles (10/13/09) and read Strengthen Your Game from the Ground Up). Often included might be some barefoot running on grass or sand to work the various foot muscles and tendons in different ways than with shoes. This advice was always for the athlete not already dealing with the various types of foot type related problems like plantar fasciitis (heel and arch), shin splints, runner's knee and other postural "overuse problems". These runners not only benefited from optimum shoes, but also prescription in shoe orthotics to control abnormal motions, or other biomechanical problems. Running barefoot or in minimal shoes for them only made problems worse. These factors don't even consider the importance of protection from rocks, glass, and other common ground obstacles, which to say the least is far more common than not. In the safe, ideal setting like a grass golf course or a sandy beach, the variety of running barefoot can be both exhilarating and beneficial if not overdone.

The stride and foot strike of running barefoot often is different (landing on the ball of the foot or mid-foot, compared to heel striking with shoes), and this can work and condition different muscles of the foot and lower leg. Again, this can be and often is of benefit to the trouble free and good foot type runner. The question is Pros and cons so here are some good points to consider:

1. There is no real evidence that running barefoot or with minimalist shoes reduces running related injuries. Also, there is no evidence that it improves performance.
2. General consensus from sports medicine experts still says wear the proper shoes for your foot type and mechanics.
3. A little variety with some barefoot running on safe surfaces can be fun and productive for exercising "little used foot muscles", but not great idea if you've got a history of problems and injuries.
4. Stick with optimum shoes for the vast majority of your running and if interested mix in (10-20%) of minimalistic shoe work on a gradual basis. Listen to your body and strengthen those feet and ankles!

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