



Walking Shoes – four (4) essential elements “And some opinionated details”

People are always asking for specific shoe recommendations. But, I don't like to make personal suggestions because everyone's feet are different and people have different walking styles. Additionally, all walkers should get a review of their walking form, specifically a “gait analysis” done at a wellness facility or shoe store first to see what shoes may offer the best safety as well as performance.

- **(MOST IMPORTANT)** Before you look for shoes, be sure to have your legs, feet, and forward movement analyzed by a fit specialist.

However, once you have an idea how your feet perform with shoes, there are some basic tips that can help you select the proper shoe that will work with you, not breakdown, not lead to injury, and not result in constantly replacing them.

There are four basic elements I look for in walking shoes, whether it is for competition or just strolling around the streets.

Generally, the best shoes for fitness walking should have four key ingredients:

- 1 – Low heel – for proper heel-to-toe foot placement and roll**
- 2 – Lightweight – walkers have more foot strikes than runners**
- 3 – Flexibility – since your feet will expand during your walking**
- 4 – Durability – to withstand many walks, on many surfaces**

But, before you are ready to shop, here are some details to consider:

- **Look for a low, supportive heel that rounds (or bevels) in.** A thick heel or one that flairs out will cause your foot to slap down and not roll. This slows down forward momentum and increases the occurrence of sore shins. The opposite is also true – Stay away from “toe shoes” or some of the very bare Minimalist shoes since they don't even have a heel at all. You still need some heel support. Finally, stay away from “shape-up” rolling shoes—they don't offer smooth heel-to-toe rolls and won't support normal or severe pronation.

- **Look for a shoe that is light weight and breathable.** The last thing you want is the clunky, heavy, leather walking shoe. Remember – You will be planting

your feet more often than a runner since your stride is fixed. Don't be impressed just with the cushiony feel. Look for light shoes that have the mesh-looking material that is meant to withstand the elements and expand with your feet.

- A walker's foot should hit the ground heel first and then roll to the toe. So, you will **need a flexible sole and more bend in the toe than a runner**. You should be able to twist in the toe box area. Stay away from shoes with narrow toe boxes for they will lead to possible black nails and toe fractures, and could force your body to alter your posture which might lead to back, knee, and hip stress.

- **The most important thing of course is a shoe that fits properly.** Be sure your foot has enough room in the toe box. To achieve the proper heel-to-toe roll, you need toe movement in a "push off" as you transition from leg to leg. About a half of an inch room might work but be sure the foot is snug in the main forefoot area and heel. If not, you will experience blisters as your feet gradually expand within the shoe. With support of a semi-rigid heel counter, your heel should not slip, and the shoe should not pinch or bind, especially across the arch or ball of your foot. Stay away from Minimalist (separate toe) shoes for they usually don't have heel counters and would lead to quicker shoe breakdown and possible heel blisters. Remember, if you are walking on many roads or possibly on some trails, your shoes need to withstand the elements but also offer a sustaining, enjoyable walking experience. You need to focus on your surroundings or family and friends with you as you walk – not on lingering blisters or shoes coming apart.

Tips to consider before you head out the door...

- **Go shoe shopping at the end of the day** or after your walk when your feet may be slightly swollen. Also be sure to wear the same socks you will be wearing during your walks. This can make a huge difference in how the shoe fits. Try on both shoes. Your feet may not be the same size (really!).

- **Do not shop when you are in a hurry.** Be sure to walk around the store for a few minutes on a hard surface. If the store has an objection to this, find another store. It is worth the effort in spending a few extra dollars.

- **Wear your shoes in the house for a few days to try them out.** Don't venture outdoors until you are sure the shoes will work. (If the shoes are not going to work out you will want to exchange them before scuffing them up).

- **Keep track of how many miles** you put on your shoes. Replace them every 300 to 600 miles. To extend shoe life, be sure to only wear them for your walks. Rotating two pair of shoes will give them time to "bounce back" between walks.

My experience has taught me that the local running shoe stores or specialty fitness stores have the best support – not only in locating the best shoes but in getting the best service and training. Yes! Many of these

stores employ runners and fitness experts. On the downside, some may not have an understanding or respect of fitness walking but you will get a specialist taking time to analyze your feet and not pressure you like a general shoe seller.

“Current Trick of the Trade” - Do your shoe investigating before you hit the stores. When in a store, get to feel the shoes and learn more about shoe selections by talking with the employees or reviewing shoe details. Now might be the best time to get a gait analysis done to determine if you need motion control support in your walking. Then....

The tip that specialty stores will NOT tell you – explore the many fitness companies online such as Running Warehouse, Zappos, Road Runner Sports, Holabird Sports, Eastbay, etc. On the plus side, online shoes will be cheaper – possibly without any mark-up, tax, or shipping charge. On the downside, you are taking a chance with the mail service. Regardless, once you know the type of shoe and your size that would fit you, online shopping might be the way to go.

Final tip: Stay away from “Designer” or “Functional” Walking Shoes:

Walking shoes are available in many places but be sure to stay away from shoes that are made for show, fashion, etc. Many are designer-made or functionally-made which do not possess the four (4) elements.

- Be cautious of “Retro” running shoes that only have an upper covering that appear to be a rebirth of a highly successful performance shoe when in reality there is no support or healthy structure within to include supporting material.
- Be cautious of canvas or leather-made “Walking” shoes which may be promoted for fitness activities but are actually made for folks who are on their feet all day – medical personnel, food service workers, school coordinators, etc. While these shoes may have water and liquid protection for fluid spills, they will NOT expand as your feet expand during the day or in long workouts.

Designer and Functional walking shoes may work for you but many running shoes will probably be better.

Fitness walking shoes are available in many locations, AND you don’t need to spend an enormous amount of money to find shoes that will work for you. Finding good, effective shoes for fitness walking takes time but you can locate good shoes at discount shoe stores as well as top-of-the-line fitness specialty stores... and then there is the Internet.

Since walking shoes are your primary investment, spend the time to learn a little about your feet and fitness walking shoes.

Remember – Shoes that are lightweight, have low heels, are flexible and durable are shoes that offer the best chance to help you optimize your walking experience. It may be “trial and error” until you find the right shoes but this advice should help in the long run (err... walk).

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