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Less than three decades ago, white canvas sneakers were all you needed for almost any physical activity. Today more than 300 million pairs of athletic shoes are sold each year, and the selection is so broad that choosing a suitable pair can be overwhelming.

Most experts agree, however, that selecting the right fitness shoe is crucial to injury prevention, and the wrong shoe can contribute to a variety of health problems. For example, poor arch or heel support can lead to plantar fasciitis (arch pain), inadequate heel cushioning is associated with heel spurs, and insufficient shock protection can promote stress fractures or even low-back pain.

How can you select the best shoe for you? Here are some helpful tips from Stanford University fitness expert Terrie Heinrich Rizzo, MAS:

1 Understand Foot Biomechanics, Especially Pronation.

More than half of all people overpronate (their feet roll too far to the inside and push off the inside edge of the forefoot) or underpronate (their feet don't roll in quickly enough, so each stride finishes on the outer edge of the foot, near the little toe). People with a low or flat arch usually overpronate, whereas those with a high arch tend to underpronate.

2 Analyze Your Foot Type. Wet your feet and walk on a piece of cardboard. If you can see the entire sole in the imprint, you probably have a low arch and tend to overpronate. If you see only portions of your forefoot and heel with a narrow connection between them, you probably have a high arch and tend to underpronate. Shoes you've worn for some time may also provide clues: Overpronation creates wear on the outside heel and inside forefoot; underpronation causes wear on the outer edge of the heel and the little toe.

3 Match Your Foot Shape to the Shoe. Each company makes its shoes around its own set of "lasts," or foot-shaped molds, which vary in arch height, heel width, toe box size, etc. So certain manufacturers' shoes will fit you better than others. Make a paper tracing of your foot while standing and take the tracing with you when you go shoe shopping. You will be able to see which models best match your feet.

4 Determine How Much Cushioning You Need. The cushioning within a shoe disperses impact forces. Adequate

cushioning is especially important if you underpronate; are an older exerciser; weigh over a certain amount (150 pounds for women, 180 pounds for men); or have a joint problem.

5 Consider Stability. The shoe's heel counter (the part that cups the heel) should be firm; if it "gives" easily, look for a better shoe. In general, overpronators need more stable shoes than underpronators—so if you overpronate, be especially careful to select a shoe with a stiff heel counter and rear upper (the part that covers the top of the foot near the ankle).

6 Test for Flexibility. Underpronators generally need more flexibility in their shoes than overpronators. To determine the flexibility of a shoe, hold it by its heel and midfoot (not the toe) and twist; the more the shoe resists, the stiffer it is.

7 Match the Shoe to the Activity It's Intended For. If you wear a shoe that's inappropriate for the activity you're engaged in, you risk injury. Look for a sport-specific shoe. A running shoe should provide excellent heel cushioning and shock absorption, a flexible forefoot and a distinct Achilles notch. In a walking shoe the forefoot should be more rigid than in a running shoe, and the sole should be rounded so you can smoothly shift weight from heel to toes.

8 Have Your Feet Measured. Feet widen and lengthen as you age or gain weight. Get both yours measured at least once a year.

9 Remember: Fit Matters; Size Doesn't. Manufacturers use different sizing standards, so ignore the numbers and go strictly by fit. Look for a roomy toe box and adequate width across the broadest part of your foot. Fit should be snug at the heel, however, to prevent slippage during movement.

10 When in Doubt, Throw Them Out. Your shoes can look okay but no longer provide proper support or shock absorption. Consider changing shoes after 150 hours of cross training, 300 to 500 miles of running or 1,000 miles of walking. In addition, replace your insoles frequently, rotate several pairs of shoes and save sport-specific shoes strictly for their designated activity.

**10 Tips
for
Choosing
Shoes**

