

Recovering Your Body

The trend afoot? The bare minimum. *by Thom Forbes*

There's a movement afoot that you'll probably notice and wonder if people have lost their minds along with their shoes. In its purest form, it's called barefoot running because that's precisely what it is.

Proponents say that millions of years of evolution have created the best running gear possible—the naked foot—and that the supportive shoes developed by the athletic shoe industry over the past 40 years encourages a dysfunctional heel-to-toe running stride. When you run barefoot, you necessarily land on the front or midsection of the foot and take advantage of the spring in your arch. Land on your heel without any extra padding, on the other ... er, foot, and you'll likely yell "Ow!"

But you're just as likely to spy someone in shoes that make his or her feet look like they belong to an exotic simian. This minimal sheathing, which wraps around each toe individually, has a thin layer of rubber for the sole. The heel is flat. They are Vibram FiveFingers.

FiveFingers are slightly disturbing to some people. One male online commentator likened wearing them to donning a kilt in public. "Man up, and get over it," he advised. "Or run at night." The truth is that if you do wear them to the mall, you'll find yourself being peppered with questions such as, "Where did you get them?" (search online for authorized retailers), and "What do they cost?" (\$75 to \$125).

I know this because I've joined the legion of evangelists who believe that FiveFingers are changing our lives. A lingering case of plantar fasciitis—pain in the tissue of the arch from heel to toes—vanished only after I ditched pricey custom orthotics and conventional footwear and (mostly) walked around in FiveFingers.

What's more, my hips and knees feel much better when I run, and I am able to jog five or six miles regularly for the first time in years. On the negative side, I occasionally land on a rock that sends a jolt through my sole. I've not tried pure barefoot running yet, but I intend to.

Clearly, this style of running is not to everyone's taste, and some podiatrists dispute that it's healthy or natural to do it. Robert A. Kornfeld, for example, called it a "passing fad" in a recent *Huffington Post* blog.

"Only those people with stable (not flexible) first metatarsals will do well with these [barefoot running] shoes, as well as those with very powerful lower leg musculature (although even those with powerful lower leg function will ultimately go on to some type of pathology)," he writes. Within a month, his post drew more than 600 comments, but most seemed to be from people who, based on their personal experiences, disagreed.



There is a simple protocol for learning to run barefoot or in shoes such as FiveFingers: Go slow. Listen to your body. Build up muscles in the foot and lower leg that have atrophied from being removed from the action since you were a toddler. And if you go totally barefoot, take the time to gradually toughen up the skin on the bottom of your foot.

"If your body wants the day off, be kind to yourself and give in," advises Michael Sandler in his helpful book *Barefoot Running: How to Run Light and Free by Getting in Touch With the Earth*. I would be remiss if I did not mention *Born to Run: A Hidden Tribe, Superathletes, and the Greatest Race the World Has Never Seen* by Christopher

McDougall. It weaves profiles of colorful American ultra-marathon personalities into the gripping story of the Tarahumara Indians of central Mexico, along with a dose or two of practical advice. It is generally credited with touching off the whole barefoot running craze.

Many of you may not feel comfortable or safe running without a layer of protection, and some feet just won't fit comfortably into FiveFingers. There are alternatives available, ranging from a company that makes a variation of the huarache sandals that the Tarahumara wear to old-fashioned racing flats to minimalist models such as Nike's Free and New Balance's Minimus.

Even if barefoot running has no appeal to you, consider working the tendons, ligaments and 20 muscles in your feet with a similar diligence you devote to your abs or biceps. They are essential to everything you do. Try picking up a golf ball with your bare toes, for example, or walking on them for 20 to 30 seconds. I know. Keep trying. You can do it, one step at a time. ■

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