Footwear Choices in Runners

All runners strive to stay fit and healthy enough to avoid time spent off the trails and road due to injury. Whilst the causes of running-related pain are as varied as the trails and roads we run on, there are a few key components and strategies that will help you avoid the pitfalls of injury. Strategies that commonly help resolve these injuries include education, load management, tweaking your running technique if needed, and strengthening to build resilience.

Running shoe choice is another area runners consider crucial in improving their performance and avoiding injury, but how important is it? The footwear industry has many myths surrounding it, with conflicting research adding to the confusion. These myths tend to create personal biases and tribalism, not taking in to account the complexity of every individual runner. Footwear choice has been shown to have a small but definitive impact on risk of injury, but it is largely seen as the least important factor in running injury.

Helpful hints

When looking to buy new shoes, these general hints may help you to avoid common mistakes that may impact the likelihood of injury:

- Try to avoid any major shoe changes from one pair of shoes to the next. Big changes will shift the distribution of loading and may increase likelihood of injury. E.g. if you normally wear a maximalist shoe and change to a minimalist shoe, or you normally have a heel drop of 12 mm, but someone has told you about this great shoe that's only 4 millimetres
- If you have decided to trial a different style of shoe, it's a good idea to alternate your new and old pair between runs to ease into the new type of load your body will be experiencing
- When trying on new shoes, be guided by comfort and feel. If it doesn't feel great in store, then it won't "wear in" as time goes on. A trial jog in or near the store is a good idea before purchasing if possible
- It is generally recommended to change your shoes when they become less comfortable. Some runners will describe them as feeling 'lifeless' or just don't have the spring they used to. The 600-800 km mark is commonly found to be the period athletes find their shoes become less comfortable.

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Injury-specific tips

Runners that have specific injury history may also find the following hints helpful. Note that one size doesn't fit all in this scenario and each runner's rehabilitation should still be individualised.

- Runners with achilles and/or calf pain may find a shoe with a larger heel drop beneficial in offloading the painful area for a time
- A firmer or cushioned shoe will help take pressure off the balls of the feet for those with pain in the area
- Transitioning to a forefoot running style in minimalist shoes may help improve running economy and muscle development, but a slow transition between cushioned to minimalist is important
- Reducing the heel drop may help unload the front of the knee if you are experiencing problems
- Motion control shoes (built up on the inside of the shoe) may have a positive impact for those that exert lots of force through the inside of the foot. Runners that experience achilles, shin and plantar fascia pain may find benefit in more control/support. **Please note, this does not mean that all pronated feet need to go in to motion control shoes

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