

Shoe Shopping Pointers for Happy, Healthy Feet

Planning to become more active now that warmer weather is finally here?

It's important to plan and prepare for an active lifestyle, and just as consumers purchase special equipment for new recreational activities, they should carefully consider the shoes they choose for sports – as well as everyday wear.

“An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure – especially when it comes to choosing footwear,” said Brian Scharfstein, president of the Pedorthic Association of Canada. Pedorthists are footwear experts – they specialize in the design and fit of footwear and orthotics to help deal with pain, discomfort and disabilities in the legs and feet.

The Pedorthic Association of Canada and its members stress the importance of distinguishing between occasional and functional shoes. Scharfstein explains, “Occasional shoes are shoes that people will only wear a few times, to a party or an event, so the evaluation process is not as crucial for these shoes. Functional shoes are the shoes people wear everyday, for work and play, as part of their active lifestyles. Because these shoes provide feet and legs with support for the majority of the day the selection process is very important to maintaining a healthy, active lifestyle.”

In selecting functional shoes, it is important to carefully consider the fit and function of shoes to ensure they will provide consumers with maximum support. This is important for all age groups: children whose feet are developing, adults who spend hours on their feet and often suffer from foot and leg discomfort unaware it's caused by improper footwear, and senior citizens – where studies have shown that improper footwear is one of the leading cause of falls.

One test consumers can do to evaluate the fit of their footwear is to have someone trace the outline of their foot while standing. The insole of the shoe should then be placed over the tracing to compare foot shape to shoe shape. Most of the tracing should be contained within the insole, especially the heel and ball, otherwise excessive pressure can lead to foot problems such as calluses, corns, and the development of a neuroma: a pinching of the nerves in the ball of the foot.

According to Scharfstein, in addition to finding a proper fit, the next time you go shopping for functional shoes there are a few key criteria to look for:

Removable Insole – Although many consumers are not aware of this tip, it is important to replace the insoles in shoes on a regular basis, every two to four months, in order to maintain proper cushioning. While cushioning requirements vary from one foot type to the next, the benefits of proper cushioning include less stress on your joints and improved muscle strength. For hygiene purposes, it's also helpful to buy a second set of insoles when you buy your shoes and rotate them at the end of each day to let the insoles dry in between each use.

Proper Heel Counter – The Heel Counter is the hard piece in the back of the shoe that controls the foot's motion from side-to-side. If the heel is not contained snugly, there can be excessive movement when the consumer walks resulting in blisters, heel spurs and micro-tearing causing foot pain.

Consumers can quickly test the effectiveness of a shoe's heel counter by placing the shoe in palm of their hand and putting their thumb in the midportion of the heel, trying to bend the back of the shoe. A heel counter that does not bend very much will provide superior motion control.

Bend Test – Another test consumers can try when purchasing new footwear is to hold the shoe in both hands at opposite ends, and bring their hands together. Ideally, the shoe should only bend at the ball of the foot, which matches the movement of the foot. If this is not done, the shoe may cause increased pressure on the ball and on the top of the foot, damaging the joints and soft tissue.

These are just a few helpful pointers for selecting proper footwear. As one of the few medical professionals educated in the design and fit of footwear and orthotics, Certified Members of the Pedorthic Association of Canada are regularly called upon to fill footwear prescriptions and make recommendations for helping consumers maintain happy and healthy feet.

Consumers experiencing foot or leg discomfort or pain are advised to have their doctors recommend a local pedorthist for footwear evaluation.

For more information, or to locate your closest Pedorthist please visit www.pedorthic.ca.