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The Best and Worst Shoes for Back Pain

Back pain can start at your feet — specifically with the shoes you're wearing. Find out about the link between back pain and footwear.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Wearing shoes that don't provide proper support may [cause back pain](#).
- When picking a shoe, make sure the arch of the shoe works with the natural [arch of your feet](#).

Few of us are strangers to lower back pain. In fact, as many as 80 percent of people have back pain at some point in their lives and half of all workers experience back pain symptoms each year, according to the [American Chiropractic Association](#). Not only that, but back pain ranks as the number two reason people see a doctor. Sometimes the cause is obvious, like a sports injury or bending the wrong way. Other times, however, the reason might be surprising, like when the culprit turns out to be your feet and improper footwear. But finding the right shoes — and there are many choices — may help you find relief.

Back Pain and Footwear: What's the Connection?

Though your feet and favorite stilettos can seem far removed from your back, they really can be related and contributing to your pain and, in turn, stress and fatigue. It's called a kinetic chain, the idea that the way you move one part of your body affects other areas, says [Jeremy Smith, MD](#), a spine surgeon and back pain specialist with the Orthopaedic Specialty Institute in Orange, California.

"When you have bad arch support and the gait pattern is off, that pattern travels into your back and can create stress on your back," Dr. Smith says.

[Back pain and footwear](#) can also be connected through poor choices made as consumers and fashionistas. For example, [high heels can throw off alignment](#) and add extra stress and strain on the lower back. [Flip flops](#), at the other extreme, are so flat that the lack of support can lead to arch pain, heel pain, ankle pain, or knee pain.

"Flip flops really just provide cushioning to the foot or a protective layer from the ground," says [Kenneth S. Jung, MD](#), a foot and ankle surgeon at Kerlan-Jobe Orthopaedic Clinic in Los Angeles.

When Is It Time to Visit the Podiatrist?

[Back pain can have many causes](#), but if your primary doctor can't determine the reason for your pain, then it's time to consider seeing a podiatrist to check out your feet, gait, and alignment. To prepare for the appointment, make a list of questions and symptoms along with a medical history, including medications taken and lab tests and other tests you've had, such as X-rays and MRIs. Also, if your pain gets worse when you exercise or walk, be sure to bring along the shoes you wear for those activities.

The Pros and Cons of Specialized Footwear

Besides avoiding certain types of shoes, like high heels and flip flops, consider proactively purchasing special shoes that can help prevent or ease your back pain.

"Specialized footwear can be custom-made to accommodate an individual's foot shape if a deformity exists," Dr. Jung says. "Modifications, including rocker soles, heel lifts, wedges, and posts, may be added to achieve the desired effect."

By wearing specialized footwear, you may see improvement in foot and overall alignment, which can lead to more efficient muscle use. You can also get shoes custom-made to address your specific foot and back issues.

Getting [specialized footwear](#) isn't quite as easy as going to your favorite shoe store, however. You need to be fitted by a specialist, and the shoes can be costly. As with any shoes, prices vary by brand, but the cost ranges from hundreds of dollars up to \$1,000, depending on the manufacturer and craftsmanship (though your podiatrist may have a coupon you can use at specialized shoe stores). Also, because your feet will probably change over time, you may need to have the shoes modified in the future.

Best Footwear for Back Pain

There are a number of good choices when it comes to shoes designed to ease or reduce symptoms from musculoskeletal complaints involving foot, knee, hip, and back pain, Jung says. "All of these are linked, and the force imparted on the foot is ultimately imparted on the back."

The main thing you should focus on is making sure you choose the right shoe for your particular foot type and problem.

For starters, one of the most important features to look for is the arch — it should be designed to work with the natural arch of your foot. Generally speaking, there are three arch shapes: over-pronation (low), neutral, and excessive supination (high).

Running shoes are generally designed to address many different issues, with motion control helping pronation, stability for the neutral arch, and cushioned to assist supination arches.

“Minimal” shoes are a specialized option to consider. “These shoes are designed to promote the foot striking the ground with the front or middle of the foot rather than the heel,” says Dr. Jung. “This alters the way the foot and the lower extremity contact and interact with the ground.”

Specially designed inserts or insoles can also help relieve back pain in some cases because they provide extra support.

Prescription orthotics are another [kind of specialized shoe](#). So-called functional orthotics are usually made from plastic or graphite and can treat issues caused by abnormal motion. Another type, called accommodative orthotics, are softer and used more for the support and cushioning needed in painful foot conditions rather than back pain.