

If you are going to be a walker, you need one very important piece of equipment. Well, actually two: a pair of good walking shoes. They will be your best walking buddies -- for 6 months to a year, anyway. So choose them with care. And when you find that perfect-fitting style, stay with it.

There is a shoe out there for everybody -- or, more precisely, for every foot. You just need to know a few facts so that you can get the right fit. An expensive shoe that's the wrong size or shape won't serve you as well as a moderately priced shoe that accommodates the contours of your foot, bending where your foot bends and giving your toes ample wiggle room.

If you're like me, once you find a great pair of walking shoes and you discover what real comfort feels like, you may not want to subject your feet to anything else. These days, I wear heels maybe once or twice a year. All of my work shoes are designed for maximum comfort.

Actually, finding a pair of shoes that is comfortable as well as stylish has gotten a lot easier in the past year or two. More and more footwear manufacturers are realizing that many consumers -- women, in particular -- will no longer sacrifice comfort and foot health for fashion.

So how do you find the perfect match for your feet? Let's get down to some shoe-buying basics.

Learn the Lingo

Before you go shoe shopping, take a few minutes to familiarize yourself with the following terms. The salesperson you deal with should understand this terminology, too. Believe me, it can make a world of difference in the quality and fit of the shoe you take home.

EVA: A shock-absorbing foam that's soft, light, and flexible, EVA is found in the soles of many good walking shoes. It compresses on long walks but springs back after a day of rest. Some shoes have dual-density EVA, which simply means that the material has two different compression rates.

Heel-strike: This is the point where your heel makes contact with the ground if you're using proper walking technique. You need to consider heel-strike when selecting a shoe, because your heel takes a pounding with each step -- and that may happen thousands of times when you're out walking. Look for a shoe that provides stability, with a slightly beveled heel and plenty of cushioning.

Last: This is the mold on which a shoe is formed. The last -- and, therefore, the bottom of the shoe -- can be straight, semi-curved, or curved. For a good fit, make

sure that the shape of your shoe matches the shape of your foot.

Medial support: Sounds fancy, but don't let the term confuse you. It simply means arch support.

Overpronation: This means that your ankle rolls inward when you're walking, which puts way too much pressure on your arch and nearby ligaments and tissues. Over time, overpronation can lead to heel pain and other problems. A good shoe supports and stabilizes your ankle so that it doesn't roll inward.

Sock liner: Every good shoe has one of these inserts, which cushions and protects your foot from the shoe's "guts." Without a sock liner, you would feel stitching or little lumps of glue when you walk.

Toebox: This is the part of a shoe that encases your piggies. It should be roomy, both in width and in height. And it should somewhat resemble the toe-end of your foot. No more pointy toes.

Size Matters, But That's Not All

To ensure that your shoes fit well, you need to learn a bit more about your feet. What I'm going to explain now may surprise even some shoe salespeople. But that's okay. Armed with this information, you can help yourself.

For a shoe to fit properly, it has to match your foot type -- that is, its flexibility and curvature. You can easily assess these characteristics on your own in a few simple steps.

Flexibility refers to whether your foot is rigid, neutral, or flexible. To find out, do the following:

1. Sit in a chair, with one foot resting across the opposite knee. Measure the elevated foot from the heel to the tip of the longest toe (usually your big toe) by holding a ruler against the sole. Be careful not to press on the ruler, as that will skew the measurement. Write down the number, then do the same with your other foot.
2. Lay the ruler on the floor and stand on it with one foot. Measure from the heel to the tip of the longest toe. Write down the number, then switch feet and repeat.
3. Determine your foot type based on these descriptions.
 - ┆ If the measurements taken when seated and when standing are about the same, your feet are rigid.
 - ┆ If the measurements differ by about 1/8 inch, your feet are neutral.
 - ┆ If the measurements differ by about 1/4 inch, your feet are flexible.

Now that you know your foot type, you're ready to determine your foot curvature -- that is, whether your foot is straight, semi-curved, or curved. Here's what to do.

1. Sit in a chair, with a piece of paper on the floor in front of you.
2. Put your left foot on the paper so that it's pointed straight ahead. Lift your toes upward to stabilize the shape of your foot.
3. Either by yourself or with someone's help, trace the outline of your foot on the

paper.

4. Pick up the paper and fold the outline of your foot in half, bringing the heel up over the toe. Then fold the heel-end back down, so the heel is visible.