

Smarten Up Your Feet

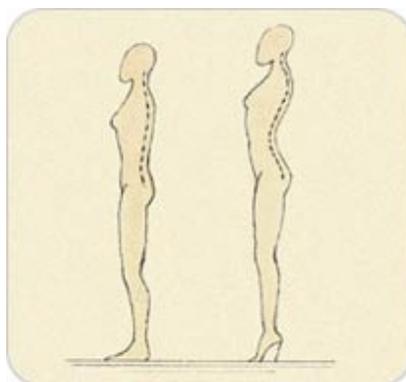
Those of you who have worked with me over the last few years would have heard me whinging and moaning about footwear designs and looking after your feet. Looking after those things at the end of your legs can help significantly reduce calf and back pain and have you moving better.

For thousands of years our feet have been the main way we've interacted with our planet. As cavemen and women we strolled around looking for bugs to eat and animals to hunt or avoid. Imagine how many subtle movements our feet, and entire body's did when we walked barefoot over uneven stony ground! These small movements have great importance in fine tuning our spines and body to function well. But these days we have great big air soles, high heels, and the latest stupid invention is a microchip in the sole of your shoe that adjusts your shoe cushioning while walking. Your foot and body lose its ability to fine tune itself when exposed to this gimmicky footwear for too long. My colleague Phil Beach - osteopath and acupuncturist, calls shoes "sensory deprivation chambers'. He believes that modern footwear is playing havoc with our bodies – I absolutely agree with him.

Now I realise that we don't swing from branches any more, but just look at how nimble and clever your fingers are compared to our clumsy toes. Our modern western culture has turned our once clever toes into lumps of clay. Other cultures use their feet in daily life – some cultures can even thread needles using their toes. Don't try that one unless you've got a load of sticking plasters hanging around. We need to get more sensitivity and movement into our feet.

Here are Dave's steps to help look after your feet:

1. Try to walk barefoot as often as possible - Weather and terrain dependant. Get your shoes off indoors in particular. You know - those hippies had it right all along
2. Don't buy air/gel shoes that don't allow you to feel the ground. High shock absorbing soles are useful in shoes designed for high mileage road running in straight lines, but never for sports that involve changes in direction (basketball, netball, volleyball). Don't walk around in high shock absorbing shoes either – get some flat shoes that allow you to interact with the planet.
3. Avoid high heels. These shorten the calf muscles predisposing the wearer to calf problems and back problems down the line. I'm a short male so this will help me feel taller too. High heels are fine for the odd evening but can alter spinal curves to the point of disaster if worn regularly. The figure below shows what typically happens to your lower back when wearing high heels. If you have back problems I would strongly recommend taking an axe to your heels.





Sitting on toes



Sitting on feet Japanese style

4. Do these foot/ankle stretches often. Phil Beach calls these “archetypal postures” – or postures that our ancestors would have done on a regular basis. Our ancestors were clever! These positions help to fine tune the body and bring the foot back into an optimal position. Since we invented the chair and EVA soles we’ve stopped using these fine tuning positions. You should comfortably be able to sit in these positions if your feet and ankles are in good condition. These positions can be quite intense if your feet and ankles have been neglected for a while. Take your weight forward and place cushions under your shins to begin with if these stretches are too painful.

5. Wear great shoes.

I’d recommend German-made Birkenstock footwear – especially their massage sandals. These are intense, I’m not exaggerating. After a month I could walk for an afternoon without noticing the pain. These stimulate the feet with thousands of needle like nubs –they really do feel like needles to start with.

I’d also recommend Nike Air Free shoes (as long as you’ve got good foot structure). They make the best cross trainers I have ever worn. Stable yet mobile.

Vibram 5 finger shoes are also high on my list of great footwear. These are like gloves for your feet. I usually wear these on recovery days to help my legs recover. They feel wonderful.