

Choosing a running shoe

When you decide to buy a new pair of running shoes, you will be confronted by a wide range of options to choose from. Just buying the same brand and model that you have been wearing may not be an option as the appearance and possibly the features of that model may have changed since you bought the last pair. Running shoes are consumer items and the lure of the new drives change. When you do find a shoe that you like, it is worth considering buying a second pair and alternating their use. This extends the period for which you have shoes that you like and allows each pair to dry out between use.

All modern running shoes are designed to feel comfortable when you try them on in the store. If you do have a problem with a particular model it probably will not become evident until you have worn them for some time. Trying out new shoes on a treadmill in the store is a better option than just putting them on and walking up and down a few metres. This will still not indicate how things like the sole pattern will cope with surfaces like bitumen or grass.

Each brand manufacturer has decided on some feature that they consider to be something that differentiates them from other brands. This is usually the sole construction and so we have cushioning based on air, gel, wave, grid, etc. Other differentiation features include sole patterns and lacing arrangements. Is one of these shoe constructions better than another? It depends on what you mean by better. You could look at research outcomes to determine if one form of cushioning reduces running injuries more than another - an interesting question to ask any of the brand representatives. You could decide to take the "poll driven" approach and look around on the starting line at your next race and choose the brand that most other runners are wearing. Another option is to see which is the most expensive shoe and reason that price is an indicator of "best". On the other hand you could just choose the brand and model that has a colour scheme that matches your club running gear. Choosing a shoe because a world champion runner wears it is not a good reason to buy it - unless perhaps the company offers to sponsor you too.

Within brands, terms like motion control, stability, cushioning, neutral and light weight are used to describe the properties of various models. These properties are then supposed to be matched to your running style and training characteristics. For example, you would think that adding a generous layer of cushioning in the sole of a shoe would reduce impact forces on the body and hence injuries, but is there evidence for this? Some studies indicate that removing the sensory signals that would normally operate during the foot impact stage of the running cycle reduces the capacity of the total leg structure to dissipate impact forces effectively. Other features like high, excessively padded heel counters can contribute to achilles problems. Whenever you change the nature of how your foot interacts with the ground while running you will introduce new stress patterns in the foot and upwards through the leg and hip and this can contribute to injuries.

If you quickly increase the intensity and/or distance you run each week you will increase the magnitude and total amount of force impacting on your body as a result of running and, if this total demand is greater than the body's capacity to adapt to it, injury will result. If you always run on hard surfaces, your foot impact will be greater than that on soft surfaces. If you wear heavy shoes, their weight will be a factor in the energy you expend on each stride. If you wear shoes with inflexible soles your foot will have to work harder to achieve its natural operation from impact to toe off (if it is able to do so at all). A light, neutral, flexible shoe could well be a better option to minimise injuries and assist faster racing and interval training than a (probably) more expensive cushioned shoe. Training on a range of surfaces is another strategy to employ. If you do decide to switch shoe types, phase the new pair in over a period of time. Look for hard wearing materials on the sole and an open, but durable mesh fabric upper. Simplicity and function lead to better shoe outcomes than complex patterns of sewn on bits of brightly coloured plastic.

Do an internet search and see if you can find any research studies that show that modern cushioned or stability running shoes have reduced the incidence of running injuries or if there is a correlation between price and injury incidence. If you do this, pay particular attention to the sample size, the credentials of the researchers and whether or not the research was commissioned by a company. Remember that there is a big difference between an assertion and a statement supported by reliable data and between a shoe review and research. Opinions are not a substitute for facts.

A last consideration? Manufacturers try to dictate buying patterns through their marketing strategies, but ultimately they move to styles and features that people buy. If more people buy light, neutral, flexible shoes more of this type of shoe will appear in running shoe stores. Buy thick-soled cushioned models and this is what will dominate the shelves.