



barefoot

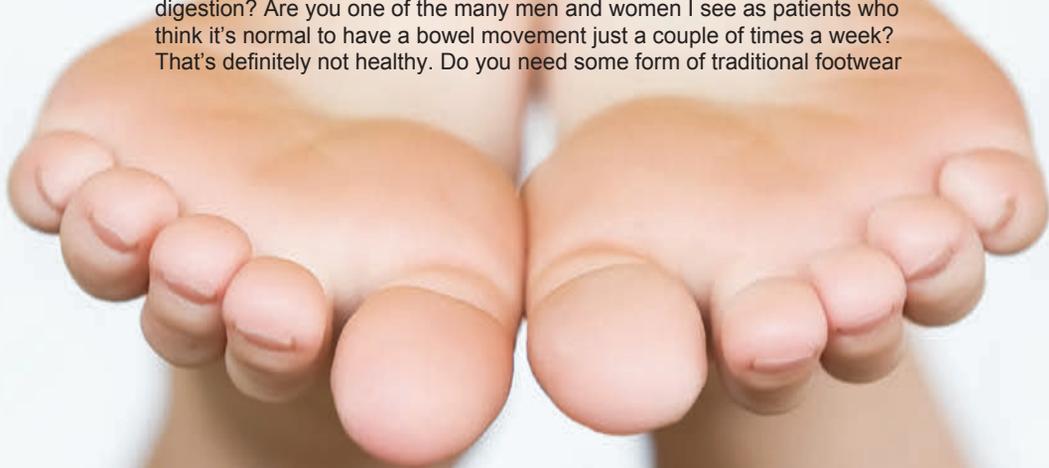
Humans, with rare exception, should be able to function well from birth until death in a barefoot state. But, sadly, many people are unable to walk, run or stand barefoot for even a few minutes without feeling discomfort, pain or general uneasiness. Many people have essentially lost their ability to keep themselves up without secondary support, because of either poorly developed biomechanics or underlying health problems.

What I discuss in this article is true "barefoot," and it's something that should be—but is often not—an important aspect of a Paleo lifestyle. If you're someone who already considers yourself part of the special barefoot club, with a closet full of minimalist shoes for every occasion, I'm suggesting you literally step out of the false sense of reality that you're giving yourself and your feet, and go truly bare.

Is Barefoot for Everyone?

I don't think there is a debate on how we were meant to run, or even walk, for that matter. Humans are not meant to overstride and land on their heels when running—things that today's typical running shoes force us to do. Even while walking, conventional footwear will elicit more of a heel strike, an extended stride and an unnatural, inefficient push-off with the foot. Yes, even with the thinnest of soles under your feet, you will change your gait and how your foot lands. A barefoot walker, on the other hand, will land softly with a shorter stride and roll efficiently off the foot.

But you also need to be healthy to be able to move around barefoot. Health is not merely the absence of some pathological disease. Many people think they're healthy, but are often not as healthy as they could be. Do you sleep well through the night and wake up feeling refreshed, without aches and pains? If not, I'd define that as poor health. Do you take any medication—whether it's an anti-inflammatory, a hormone replacement, or a drug to wake up, go to sleep or have sex? Drugs are sometimes truly necessary, but taking any medication is a sign of some health problem. Do you lack physical and/or mental energy during the day? How about your digestion? Are you one of the many men and women I see as patients who think it's normal to have a bowel movement just a couple of times a week? That's definitely not healthy. Do you need some form of traditional footwear



with support and extra “cushion” so you can walk, stand, or even exercise? Or even worse, do you need to wear an orthotic in order to walk without pain? If you do, then you’re definitely lacking in the health department when it comes to conditioning.

If you’ve been wearing traditional shoes for some time, you’ll need to transition gradually into barefoot and/or minimalist footwear, but a healthy person should be able to achieve this feat. You have to work your way toward barefoot just as you do health—they are both processes. Health and bare feet complement each other.

For those of you who think that going barefoot has no significant impact on how you move and feel during the day, I would ask: Are you actually barefoot for a prolonged period of time every day? I have yet to meet a person who is usually barefoot and rarely wears the typical shoes found today, who does not feel more vibrant and agile, with better body awareness than when they were shod. Again, I’m referring to being 100 percent barefoot for most of the day.

Barefoot Beyond the Feet

Each foot is home to thousands of nerve endings, and the information they receive and pass on to the rest of the body is nothing less than extraordinary. When your foot feels the ground (or whatever is below it, including footwear), the thousands of touch receptors in the nerve endings feed data back to your entire nervous system. Since your nervous system controls your entire body, any foot impairment, dysfunction, injury, pain or improper footwear can not only interfere with lower leg function and balance, but also has the possibility to affect other aspects of your health.

Walking or running barefoot is an ideal way to improve your proprioception (sense of position) and kinesthetic sense (the feedback your nervous system receives from your feet). Natural, unaltered motions of the human body provide optimal neurological input and increase blood flow to the brain, improving the health of the nervous system. This increased blood flow provides more nutrients and oxygen to the brain and the rest of the body, thereby improving the overall health of the unshod person. This is especially important in a developing child and is why a child should be barefoot as much as possible, both indoors and out.

Use It or Lose It

If you’re truly healthy and not injured, should you ditch your traditional footwear? Though many people might advise you to just keep doing what you’re doing, I don’t support that position. You will only truly be sure if your feet and other parts of your body are strong and healthy if you venture out of your footwear. If you have trouble taking this step, it’s an indication that there is a problem you’ve been supporting—the same as if your lack of pain while playing tennis were because you’d been wearing a brace. Just because you don’t have pain, weakness or discomfort doesn’t mean a problem isn’t there. Ask yourself why you can’t go without your supportive shoes or orthotics. This doesn’t mean you should go barefoot right away, but it’s a good opportunity to enter the realm of minimalism.

We’ve all heard the saying “use it or lose it,” and the feet are no exception. If you don’t place certain demands on your tissues, there’s no reason for them to adapt and stay developed. Eventually, the muscles, tendons and ligaments you don’t use will lose their function. If you wear shoes too often, you risk losing mobility, stability and proprioception as you age, which can not only result in balance problems but may also affect other areas of your health.

Transitioning Toward Barefoot

Yes, too many people are getting injured by switching from their current footwear to minimalist footwear or even barefoot. This gives the traditional medical doctor, podiatrist or therapist reason to believe that modern humans are not meant to be barefoot, and that we need to protect our feet with more-supportive shoes. I get a fair share of hate mail from people who think that because we don’t live in wild jungles, we need support on our feet to get through the day on our “unnatural” surfaces. Though of course I don’t agree with this, someone who has always worn supportive footwear or orthotics isn’t going to be able to make the shift in a drastic manner. Many of these people do, and they get injured. When they visit doctors and therapists, rather than educating their patients on overall health (diet, lifestyle and foot care), the practitioners convince them that barefoot is evil and humans need shoes all the time.

You must transition to barefoot slowly and carefully so you don’t injure yourself. If you’ve been wearing supportive shoes with orthotics for years, the transition might take some time. Start by just walking barefoot inside your house as much as you can comfortably. If that’s painful, then you can start with a minimalist-type (transitional) shoe and eventually work your way toward full barefoot. It’s okay and often advised to alternate between your current traditional shoes and a minimalist shoe or barefoot if you have pain. If you’re wearing orthotics, talk to your prescribing doctor about weaning off of them so you can walk naturally again and stop supporting your dysfunction—which is essentially what orthotics do. If your doctor doesn’t think it’s possible for you to rehab your feet in such a way, then I’d find another doc, unless your situation truly warrants a supportive device (which is very rare).

Once you can comfortably walk barefoot, then work on balancing (one leg at a time) while barefoot for several seconds to a minute at a time. Hard surfaces (tile, hardwood) are okay and advised! Next, venture outside onto hard, smooth surfaces such as your driveway. Slowly build up time as comfortably as you can. Eventually make your way onto other surfaces such as grass and gravel. Of course, make sure these areas are safe to walk on. If barefoot is bothersome to you outside, use a minimalist shoe at first.

After you’re walking barefoot outside comfortably, try some barefoot running on a flat, hard surface—not too much at first or you’re likely to develop sore feet and calves very quickly! If you don’t want or don’t like to run, that’s perfectly fine—continue to walk barefoot outside, and especially inside, as much as you can.

Going barefoot isn’t about following some trend. Many people are starting to go barefoot, just as they are Paleo—it’s the latest fad. But the minimalist/barefoot trend is already going backward after just a few short years. Minimalist shoes are getting thicker and softer, much like the average human being. If you follow this trend, you’ll be wearing a thicker, softer shoe next year than you were last, and you’ll miss the health and fitness benefits of wearing less without even knowing it because fewer and fewer people will be talking about it.

The Paleo lifestyle is the complete package. It’s a way of life. It’s not eating gluten free while you sit at a desk all day and walk around in thick shoes. Lose your shoes entirely and take yourself to a whole new level of well-being. 

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