

Is barefoot running good for you?

Asks Elizabeth from Maryland

By [Rachel Mahan](#), posted October 20th, 2008.

I recently got a pair of gloves—for my feet. They make my toes look oddly reptilian, but the thin, rubber Vibram FiveFingers [shoes](#) are popular among people who want to run barefoot while avoiding cuts and dirt. I tried running “barefoot” this way, but the next day my knee hurt and my calves were sore. So was it a good idea?

“There’s no question that you can run barefoot and be extremely healthy,” says Daniel Lieberman, who studies the evolution of human anatomy at Harvard University. “Clearly our feet evolved to run barefoot,” he says. Sneakers are a recent development. Of course, so is pavement. Lieberman also notes that orthotic inserts may actually make our feet weaker.

Previous research has shown that running barefoot requires less energy, and runners tend to land with less force on their heels. Some also suggest that barefoot running may result in fewer injuries.

However, there are not many studies of barefoot runners. And many of the studies only examined people who regularly wore shoes but removed them just for the experiment, says Lieberman. Given this limitation, he is now conducting research supported by Vibram with people who are accustomed to running without shoes to see whether or not it’s beneficial.

Even without conclusive research, some runners just prefer to go barefoot. Websites devoted to going sans shoes cite benefits such as fewer injuries, while others say it’s just more natural.

Many people agree that running barefoot should be approached cautiously. “In principle, the idea to strengthen those muscles is very good,” says Benno Nigg, who studies biomechanics at the University of Calgary and also says he works with shoe companies. But runners who want to try it barefoot should start off slowly. Run on soft surfaces like grass for only a few minutes at a time.

Stephen Pribut, a private practice podiatrist in Washington, D.C., shows some of his patients how to strengthen their foot muscles by picking up a towel with their toes. However, he maintains that “you’re not going to un-pronate your foot by exercising any muscle in your foot.” Overpronation, or excessive rolling inward of the foot, happens because of bone structure, he says. In other words, some biomechanical problems will not be corrected by strengthening the feet.

Pribut, who is also on the board of advisors for *Runner’s World* magazine and a former president of the American Academy of Podiatric Sports Medicine, suggests that only runners with a certain arch shape should try barefoot running. “Some people’s feet are just built for needing guidance” from shoes, like people with low arches, he says.

Bruce Williams, a private-practice podiatrist in Indiana and current president of the American Academy of Podiatric Sports Medicine, adds: “I just think there’s a lot of hype out there over barefoot running.”

The jury’s still out on running barefoot. Whether your body can tolerate it or not may depend on your foot structure, but there is some doubt about how helpful barefoot running is for most people. Of course, if you do try it, watch out for broken glass and other potentially serious hazards.*

*Sentence added October 20, 2008 at 12:28 pm