

Fit, Function and Feel - What to consider when buying new shoes.

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Shoes are the interface between your body and the surface beneath your feet. How efficiently your body moves through its daily tasks is dependent on this interaction. Add in speed, load, stops and side-steps and the demands on your footwear goes up and the union between the two even more important.

As with many things you get what you pay for, but there's also a point in which you can pay for things that you don't need or by making a slightly different choice, you would get much more for your dollar and overall more enjoyment from your footwear.

To try to make things a little easier I have broken down some advice into 3 categories. Fit, Function and Feel. This is a simplification of what can be a complicated decision, particularly when a long injury history precedes but hopefully this helps to get you thinking about the specifics of what you want out of your shoes or questions to ask instore.

Fit

You may have had your foot measured on a Brannocks foot measuring device before, if not, this is a simple step one.

As a general rule, if each foot is a different size, half a size bigger than your longest toe is usually a good starting point. If they are identical in length, a full size is ideal. Keep in mind that each brand can be slightly different, which is where technical shoe fitting stores can come into their own. Also consider the sock you will wear with your footwear and take them in when you try on your shoes.

You may not be aware that the Brannocks is also used measure the width of your foot. By using this width measurement and looking at the corresponding letters on the tongue or label of the shoe (often B, D, 2E or 4E) it can help give some guidance when navigating footwear stores or trying on other models of choice.

The depth of the shoe is something that can often be overlooked. Consider the lumps and bumps on your toes and past experiences you have had with footwear and this will help with your shoe selection. Softer materials in running shoes will be more forgiving. Leather uppers in tennis or cross trainers not so much. Fortunately, most brands recognise this fact and to some degree a broader width shoe tends to have a bit more depth. If this is something you know you have always struggled with, chat to your instore shoe fitting experts and often they will be happy for you to spend a bit of time in them at home and review things if you had any concerns.

Function

A novel can be written about shoe function, in fact many have. The debate on minimal vs maximal shoes, cushioned materials vs firmer or more "responsive" ones and even should we be wearing footwear at all? Will likely never have an overwhelming consensus anytime soon. For you what's important is what do you want your shoe to do and what's the realistic limits of their ability to do so.

For example. A running shoe is categorised as such because it is designed for straight-line movement. It's often cushioned, lightweight and soft in the upper, with a few nuanced features that are to be considered for specific foot types.

Now it's tempting to play the occasional social tennis match, indoor netball game or courts sport at school in them, but these are sports with sharp changes in direction. The soft uppers and compression of the foams in a running shoe just can't handle this. Winter netball sees a high number of running shoes on court, but I rarely see any running shoe that makes it through a full season, not to mention the risk of sprains goes up significantly.

Hunting, Tramping and Outdoor trekking is another area where function is not always considered. There's much more to it but in the simplest form, the more alpine you intend to go the stiffer the shoe is, meaning it doesn't bend through the forefoot – at all. This is so it provides a rigid lever for going uphill and a solid platform for crampons. For low land walks and most trails, a stable and well fitted hiking shoe absent of the stiffness and maybe a lower cut ankle height will often be enough, be more comfortable on this terrain and a few hundred dollars cheaper.

Feel

This is often referred to as the 'ahhh' factor when you try on a pair of shoes. That magical goldilocks pair that's just right. Sometimes you find it and when you do it's likely to be a combination of the Fit and Function that result in a better feel.

If there are a few pairs to decide between with varying pro's and con's the feel is a good tie breaker when you need to make your final decision.

The reality though is that at some stage there is a tipping point when then shoes no longer feel fresh out of the box or comfortably bedded in.

There are endless reasons why after 3-months, 6 -months, 12-months or longer shoes may only then start to give up the ghost. Both in the physical way the shoe interacts with your foot and the materials that make them up. This is where, as Podiatrist, these factors are considered, and my recommendations would aim to get the best possible life from your shoes – which at the end of the day is what we all want.

Some things you can do to get an idea of when this may be for yourself are:

Look for compression creases. These are folds or 'crumple zones' that can be seen in the shoe as you wear them. As the shoe gets more worn, the deeper and more defined they become. They may also be more apparent on the inside or outside of the shoe, possibly indicating an uneven wear pattern and load through the muscles and tendons in this area.

Running apps and wearable tech can often allow you to plug in that you are now starting with a new shoe pair of shoes. Keep track of your km's and as you update footwear you can compare how well they lasted. Keep in mind a running shoe or any shoe for that matter that lasts 400km but was a dream to wear, may incur the cost of more frequent updates but one that lasts 1200km doesn't mean that it's a better shoe or that it was comfortable till this point. As very general guide 800-1000km is the limit of most running footwear. 25km a week means that in 8-months your runners will likely be due for replacement.

I mentioned socks briefly for fit, but they also massively influence the feel. They may seem pricey to invest in running or hiking socks but do it. You won't regret the comfort and life you get from these. Make sure you get some guidance from someone who knows what they are talking about. A sock can make that annual hunting trip, hike or half marathon an absolute pleasure or leave you cursing blisters throughout.