

Run like your ancestors

Jana Witt takes off her shoes

Is it possible that running barefoot is healthier than wearing the latest top-of-the-range running shoes? A recent scientific study claims that this might indeed be the case.

Running is undoubtedly an old favourite for many students. It's cheap, doesn't require a gym membership, and most importantly: it is good for you!

However, running can also cause damage, from blisters and sprained ankles to repetitive stress injuries. To avoid this, most runners wear specially designed running shoes, which are supposed to make running more comfortable and less harmful.

But what if wearing no shoes at all was even better? Researchers at Harvard University have found that people who are used to running barefoot may in fact be less prone to injury than those wearing expensive shoes.

The study showed that barefoot runners usually "fore-foot strike", bringing the ball of the foot down first, while runners wearing shoes tend to "rear-foot strike", meaning the heel lands first. A rear-foot strike essentially equals a dead stop, so all the impact energy is absorbed by the leg. In contrast, a fore-foot strike produces much smaller impact forces and therefore less strain on the leg.

So, should we all go back to basics, strip off our shoes and run barefoot like our ancestors?

"I personally believe almost anyone can and should try barefoot running to see how they get on", says Colin Seymour, a seasoned runner who has made the switch from high tech shoes to no shoes at all. "My only caution goes to those who have problems with sensation in their feet or blood flow problems to their lower extremities, as running barefoot relies heavily on the feedback from your feet."

The shoe industry has already caught up with the 'barefoot-trend' and is marketing so-called minimal footwear, which protects the foot, whilst preserving that 'barefoot feeling'.

"If you're coming to barefoot running as an uninjured seasoned runner then you'll find running in minimalist shoes will give you a taste of barefoot running without impacting your mileage too much.", recommends Colin, but he discourages the use of 'minimals' for complete beginners and those suffering from running injuries.

Barefoot running can be done anywhere, on the street, a racetrack or even in the gym. For beginners it may be advantageous to use a racetrack initially, to toughen up the skin on their feet, but generally barefoot runners can run wherever they wish, be it the park, on the street or elsewhere.

Swapping shoes for bare feet is not completely risk free of course, especially in the first few weeks. "You'll love the feeling of being truly free, run a little further than you should and hobble home with very sore calves and a couple of blisters on your

toes.”, explains Colin, “From my own experience, it'll take anywhere between 1 and 3 months to go from only wearing shoes to comfortably managing a 5k on relatively smooth tar, but everyone will be different.”

Barefoot running has certainly gained popularity since the newest findings from Harvard.

Future studies will now work out whether barefoot runners really are less injury-prone than those wearing shoes. Until then, we may see more runners going back to basics and following in the footsteps of their barefooted ancestors.

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| By Jana Witt

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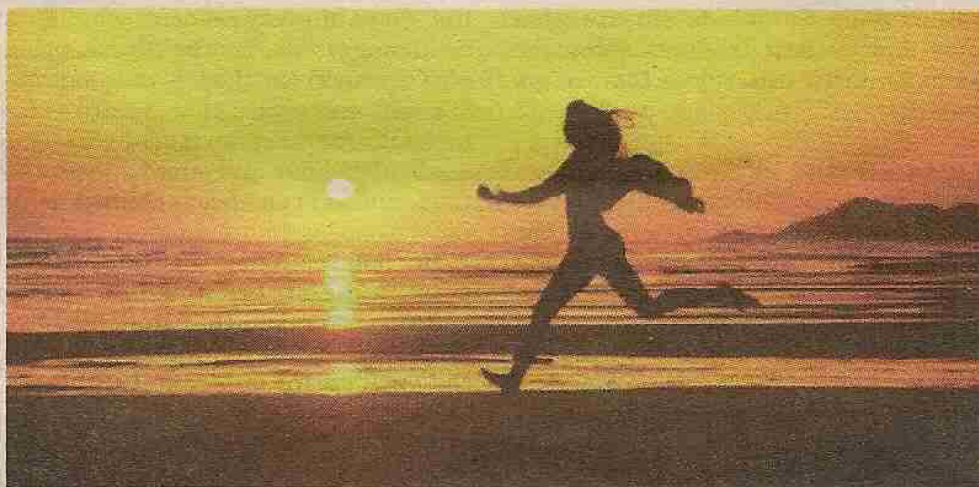
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