

If the shoe fits



Put your best foot forward—and improve stability and gait—with the right footwear.

by Claire Sykes

From prehistoric animal skins to high-tech athletic shoes, footwear has evolved over thousands of years. For many people, style is the primary consideration. But people with multiple sclerosis may have other concerns, such as how symptoms like spasticity, numbness, impaired balance and foot drop may affect walking. For them, the right shoes can make all the difference.



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A Cinderella shoe story

Shannon Auge, 36, of Fallbrook, Calif., began experiencing numbness in her feet in August 2004—about two months before she was diagnosed with MS. In 2010, after an exacerbation, Auge also developed muscle weakness. “Running and dancing were out of the question,” she says. And wearing hiking boots, she says, felt “like I was walking on tree trunks. I told my husband, ‘I wish I were barefoot.’”

A few months later, Auge tried a “minimalist” running shoe—the kind that is ultra-lightweight with little or no arch support or heel. “They don’t compensate for my leg weakness, but I feel much more stable because they hug my feet like a glove.”

Another type of footwear—the so-called “toe shoes”—really do fit like a glove, with a separate compartment for each toe and a very thin layer (as little as 3 to 4 millimeters) of rubber between your skin and the ground—almost like being barefoot.

“If these shoes are comfortable and your balance is as good with them as with a walking shoe, wear them. But they don’t have a lot of support,” says Monica Wainio, MSCS, a certified MS specialist and outpatient physical therapist at the University of Minnesota Medical Center, Fairview, in Minneapolis.

Footwear tips from the pros

Read [“No glass slippers”](#) for nine tips on finding the right footwear for you.

Though MS symptoms vary widely, “most people need shoes that are supportive and adaptive enough to help normalize the gait as much as possible,” says Terrence Philbin, DO, with the Orthopedic Foot and Ankle Center, in Westerville, Ohio. That’s especially true for people with numbness or muscle stiffness in their feet or legs, who may not be able to detect or respond to pain or other sensory signals. Stable footwear “provides balance and protection to the foot,” Dr. Philbin says. It shouldn’t be too rigid, however, or it could “rub the skin, causing injury and possible infection.”

Diagnosed with MS in 1990, Mary Whiting first wore sturdy, thick-soled shoes. “I thought that was best for walking, but I wasn’t feeling the ground so I was always leery of falling,” she says. Then Whiting, 60, of Sherman Oaks, Calif., took the National MS Society’s eight-week Free From Falls class and learned that thinner-soled, yet supportive shoes were the way to go. “Now I feel more connected to the ground, and more sure of myself.”

Claire Sykes is a Portland, Ore.-based writer who covers health and wellness.

Learn more about the Society’s [Free From Falls](#) program or call 1-800-344-4867 for more

information.

Visit the National MS Society website for "[Tips on how to look and feel good.](#)"