

Selecting shoes: How to combine comfort and style

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Imagine walking around barefoot all the time. Does that sound comfortable? Or painful? Many take pleasure in feeling sand or grass beneath their feet, or wiggling and stretching tired toes. Removing our shoes at the end of a long day can bring relief and relaxation. But how would it feel if we walked barefoot across hot pavement? Would you consider taking a hike in the woods without any shoes? Our feet benefit from the protection and stability that shoes provide. Although taking a barefoot stroll is perfectly fine, properly fitted shoes can improve our mobility, prevent injuries, alleviate foot pain, and help correct certain foot disorders.

Footwear is evaluated on form, fit, and function. Simply put, consumers choose shoes because of how they look (both on and off the foot), how they feel, and if they are perceived as practical for the intended purpose. This may seem obvious, but sometimes comfort is ignored because the “look” of a certain shoe may be more important to the consumer. For example, a person might wear high heels to an event because they believe these shoes look the best with their outfit, yet the person may feel unstable walking in them, or their feet may begin to hurt because of the design of the shoe. And in the summer, it is tempting to wear flip-flops or sandals all the time to keep our feet cool or complement our warm-weather wardrobe. But unless this type of footwear provides support and stability, a long walk in the park or at the zoo may result in sore feet, legs, or even an aching back!



For optimal foot health and comfort, it is best to wear shoes that have been fitted by a professional shoe salesperson. They are trained to observe characteristics such as foot alignment and arch positioning and should be able to recommend the best types of shoes for your feet. However, in today’s retail environment, we can easily purchase shoes over the internet or buy our shoes in stores that have a self-service shoe section. In those situations, we need to honestly assess whether a shoe fits, and not get too caught up in merely the look or style of the shoe. Fortunately, innovations in footwear designs and materials provide options of comfortable, functional shoes, without sacrificing style. When possible, buy the best quality shoes within your budget. Typically, higher quality shoes fit better and will function as intended and last longer. For more details about selecting shoes that fit, refer to our Cooperative Extension Service publication titled, *Shoe Savvy* (FCS2-342).

Shoes not only protect our feet, they can also play a key role in first impressions and nonverbal communication. Researchers at the University of Kansas and Wellesley College cited evidence that much attention is given to shoes when forming judgments about others, and that shoes are often the most expensive item in a person’s outfit. Someone’s shoes can be equated with their economic or social status, and

even personal beliefs. Interestingly, their research concluded that sometimes the message the wearer intended to convey, was not always the same one perceived. This can be a reason to primarily wear shoes that are comfortable and functional, instead of only wearing shoes because they look good or are in fashion.

Just as with clothing, comfort may be the main reason we wear a certain pair of shoes most often. Most would agree that it is more important to feel good than it is to look good. However, in terms of choosing shoes that are flattering, we should consider the style and shape of the shoe, as well as how it fits our foot. In general, it is most flattering to wear a shoe that elongates the leg, gives the illusion of height, and minimizes proportionately thick calves. That being said, we all have different body types, and we should not feel pressure to conform to societal ideals of physical perfection. Healthy bodies come in all shapes and sizes and, with regard to shoes, it is most important to wear styles that provide good support and make our feet feel fabulous.

Here are some tips to consider when choosing shoes to flatter your legs and feet.

- Blend the color of your shoes to your leg color or pant color to make your legs appear longer.
- Shoes with pointed toes or decorations in the toe area draw the eye away from ankles.
- Shoes with a low vamp, the area on top of the foot, can be flattering, as they give the illusion that the leg starts closer to the toes, instead of starting at the ankle.
 - Thick, horizontal straps can make the foot appear broader. Avoid thick straps at the ankle unless you want to call attention to them.
 - Sturdy or wedge heels can flatter and balance the proportions of thick ankles, but avoid shoes that are too clunky and heavy looking.
 - Rounded toe or toe-cap shoes and high heels can visually shorten the foot.
 - Regardless of your height, only wear high heels if you can walk in them confidently.
 - Wear shoes with proper support to maintain healthy foot posture and alignment. If your ankles “lean in” (pronate) or “lean out” (supinate), check with your doctor or specialty shoe store for information about which shoes are best.
- If you have a very narrow or wide foot, look for shoes that come in different widths as these may provide more options for a better fit.



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