



## BETTER OFF BAREFOOT?

Full-body fitness starts from the ground up—so you might want to kick off those shoes.

BY ADAM BIBLE

**WE LOVE SHOES BECAUSE** they keep our feet clean, cushioned, and puncture-free. But some say the modern shoe, for all its NASA-worthy supportive engineering, may—like a coddling parent—weaken us over time by altering the complex interaction between feet and body.

The mere act of walking uses more than 200 muscles; cocooning the feet in shoes all the time can throw off alignment, weaken the foot's muscles, ligaments, and tendons, and block sensory input from the thousands of nerve endings in our soles—contributing to foot, leg,

and back problems, says Chicago podiatrist Michael Nirenberg, D.P.M., founder of [Americaspodiatrist.com](http://Americaspodiatrist.com). In fact, in a small 2007 study published in the journal *The Foot*, South African researchers compared 180 people from three populations (Sotho, Zulu, and European) and concluded that the Zulu, who walk barefoot most of the time, had the fewest chronic foot problems.

Summer is the perfect time to go unshod—which may boost overall physiological functioning. “When you take off your shoes, the toes spread out, balance improves, and you start using your joints, ankles, and hips more instead of just clomping around with a straightened leg,” says barefoot-running advocate Chris McDougall, author of *Born to Run*. Says Danny Dreyer, author of *ChiWalking* and *ChiRunning*, “Going barefoot regularly stimulates the circulation in your feet and can have a beneficial effect on all of your organs.” It could even change your workout. A recent Harvard University study concluded that runners wearing super-cushioned shoes tend to land on the heel, taking a toll on muscles, bones, and joints.

Even if you're not doing a barefoot marathon, going shoeless from time to time can leave you with healthier, fitter feet. Try it around the house more often, or even outdoors (provided you're on a safe, clean surface). Pay attention to form, says Dreyer: Peel your feet off the floor, and shorten your stride, so you land on the front of the heel rather than kicking your leg too far forward and landing on the rear of your heel. See, small steps really are the key to better health.

THERE ARE MORE THAN

100

muscles, tendons, and ligaments in the human foot.

### “BAREFOOT” SHOES

Shoe manufacturers are toeing the minimalist trend with styles that close the distance between foot and ground for improved balance, agility, and foot strength. Thinner, lighter, more flexible designs mimic the foot's natural state.



#### VIBRAM FIVEFINGERS SPRINT

The innovative design increases foot agility and range of motion while strengthening foot and leg muscles.

\$80; [vibramfivefingers.com](http://vibramfivefingers.com)



#### NEW BALANCE 100

Made to promote a neutral gait, the low-profile racer features puncture-resistant technology on the soles.

\$75; [newbalance.com](http://newbalance.com) for retailers



#### TERRA PLANA EVO

VivoBarefoot Technology boasts a breathable mesh top, lightweight microfiber reinforcements, and a barely-there arch.

\$160; [terraplana.com](http://terraplana.com)