

Trendy fitness sandals could harm your back: Experts warn that on the wrong feet they may cause rather than alleviate pain

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They're the summer shoes that promise to correct your posture, improve your fitness, alleviate back pain and strengthen muscles.

And many of us have been persuaded by that message, with fitness sandals, such as FitFlops, MBTs and Skechers Tone-Ups to name but a few, selling in their millions.

Unlike a lot of fashionable shoes, they certainly look sturdy and sensible. But are they really as good as they seem?

FitFlops, MBTs and Skechers Tone-Ups are selling in their millions, but are they really that good?

Experts are warning that on the wrong feet, these fashionable fitness shoes - which can cost up to £150 a pair - can lead to ligament strain and muscle injuries, and may even cause rather than alleviate back pain.

Most of these sandals have a heel pitched lower than the toe area. This creates an unstable, rocking sole that is meant to force the buttocks, calf and thigh muscles to work harder.

Others have a very flat, thin sole, designed to mimic the bare foot, helping the feet and lower legs to move in the way nature intended. The theory is that this corrects pain caused by poor posture in other parts of the body.

However, Lucy Macdonald, a chartered physiotherapist specialising in musculo-skeletal injuries at the Octopus Clinic in London, says she has seen 'a lot of problems' and warns the sandals are not suitable for everyone.

'They are fine for a small percentage of people who are young, strong and fit,' she says.

But if you are unfit, have poor posture or any kind of existing hip or knee problems, then they are best avoided. 'They could lead to injuries such as back and knee pain, and strains,' she says.

Experts are warning that on the wrong feet they may even cause rather than alleviate back pain

Michael O'Neill, a consultant in podiatric surgery at the Princess Margaret Hospital in Windsor, explains: 'Some of these sandals do make the muscles of the lower leg work harder, but that is not necessarily a good thing.

'Wearing them is like walking uphill all the time, which puts a lot of additional and unnecessary strain on muscles and tendons in the lower leg, and they are likely to cause pain and damage for many.'

Even claims about toning benefits have been questioned. Studies have shown that the effects are minimal, or non-existent, and can be no better than wearing ordinary trainers.

Part of the problem is that some of these sandals lack support for the feet at the sides and heel. In this respect, they may be no better than flip-flops, says Sammy Margo of the Chartered Society of Physiotherapy.

She explains that 70 per cent of people are 'over-pronators', which means their feet roll inwards excessively as they walk - fitness sandals do little to counteract this.

Long-term, over-pronation can lead to plantar fasciitis, a painful heel condition where the tissue at the bottom of the foot is over-stretched. Not only do they not support the feet, switching to the non-existent heel of barefoot-style

sandals or the 'negative' lower heel of a rocker-soled pair also stretches and strains the Achilles tendon at the back of the leg.

For women who alternate wearing high heels with toning sandals, this effect could be even worse, as the tendon is repeatedly shortened by high-heeled shoes and then lengthened, causing pain. And far from improving their condition, anyone with existing lower back pain or hip problems such as dysplasia - a problem from birth where the hip joint is the wrong shape - might find their discomfort becomes more severe if they wear fitness shoes.

'You need to be careful in choosing supportive footwear if you have these problems,' says Sammy Margo. 'The body has to work harder to adjust to the new positions it is thrown into by this footwear and one effect could be added strain on fragile joints.'

'Some people use their feet differently in this type of shoe; others walk differently. If you have problems with posture, they are likely to be exacerbated.'

This is why it may be that back pain worsens.

'Some of these sandals do make the muscles of the lower leg work harder, but that is not necessarily a good thing'

And if you thought fitness sandals would be a good option for long walks or sightseeing on holiday, think again.

'I've seen lots of people who have fallen, stumbled or stubbed toes in this sort of footwear just because they are not used to walking in them or are walking for too long and fatigue sets in, making them stumble,' says Mr O'Neill.

So, what sort of sandal should you wear? It should be flexible around the big toe, which many of the new breed of fitness shoes aren't, says Lucy Macdonald.

'Sandals should also have a small heel or 1½ in wedge; full moulded support for the heel, which should be cupped and fastened in with a strap; and a little arch support.'

'Ironically, I see a lot of cheap sandals in High Street fashion stores that are more foot-friendly than the so-called wellness shoes.'

'They have straps to make the sandal fit snugly, a heel cup to keep the foot in place and even some arch support. My advice is not to waste your money on fitness shoes.'

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