

# Weekend Doctor

By DR. THOMAS F. VAIL

Tone your legs! Strengthen your core! Improve your posture! Get a better body without putting in any extra effort!

That sounds good. Or maybe too good to be true.

These are some of the claims made by athletic shoe companies now producing toning shoes.

But before you put down the big bucks for the newest fad in shoes, you may want more information.

First, let me give you an overview of rocker shoes. There are actually several different types of shoes that may employ some instability or a rocking motion to varying degrees.

Toning shoes may look odd but claim to utilize various designs to force the core muscles in your body to work harder to obtain balance.

They usually have significant 1-inch or more rounded soles and extra cushioning to alter the wearer's normal walking gait.

Also called unstable rocker shoes, these shoes are designed to induce instability in all planes of motion.

The idea is that if you walk in an unstable shoe, your body is forced to adapt, thus simulating the effect of walking on soft, uneven terrain. Your core muscles are strengthened as your body adapts to the instability of the shoe.

Masai Barefoot Technology pioneered this concept, but brands like Skechers, Reebok, Joya and Z7 now have toning shoes.

Mild rocker shoes are not meant to change posture or balance. They reduce strain on the heel and toes by allowing you to roll normally with each step. You see this design in most diabetic shoe manufacturers such as Dr. Comfort, Natural Step and Aetrex.

Stable and medical rockers are great for reducing certain motion in the toe joints or taking pressure away from a particular area of the foot. These are mainly prescribed by podiatrists to treat arthritis or pain in the ball of the foot, diabetes and plantar fasciitis.

People who over-pronate or have unstable feet tend to feel much better in a stable rocker-sole shoe. They also may be prescribed for use after surgical procedures.

I encourage the use of custom or over-the-counter orthotics in stable rocker-sole shoes to achieve the greatest amount of stability and control. Brands like RYN, Finn Comfort "Finnamic," Mephisto Sano and Cogent are all good examples of stable rocker shoes.

Recently, commercials for toning shoes claim you can "burn more calories, tone muscles, improve posture and reduce joint stress wearing these shoes."

They also claim "the shoe is proven to work your hamstrings and calves up to 11 percent harder and tones your butt up to 28 percent more than regular sneakers just by walking."

In light of these lofty claims, the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse enlisted a team of exercise scientists to study these shoes.

The results across the board showed no statistically significant increases in either exercise response or muscle activation during any of the treadmill tests. There is simply no evidence to support the claims that these shoes will burn more calories and improve muscle strength and tone.

Also, toning shoes can change your walking or standing posture. They can change how you walk and the muscles of the body adjust and compensate.

Because you will be using different muscles when you first wear these shoes, you're probably going to be sore. But remember, if you wear any shoe that is abnormally shaped that you are not use to wearing, it is naturally going to make your muscles sore. This is not going to translate into toning your hamstrings and butt.

In some people, toning shoes can cause injuries such as achilles tendinitis or ankle sprains because they change your standing posture. But in others, the slight adjustment in gait can feel good.

This can be deceptive though, because you are walking on an inch worth of cushioning in these shoes.

It is important also to remember that anyone who already has an unstable gait or previous knee, hip or back problems should be very cautious about using toning shoes. Because your standing posture is altered with this type of shoe, it can put extra pressure on these areas of your body and cause more harm than good.

Most doctors agree that if these shoes can get people motivated to walk, thereby improving their health and fitness, they can be worth the money.

However, make sure to check with your podiatrist who can recommend the best shoe for any activity. Also, be sure to wear them in gradually and stop immediately if any pain or discomfort develops.

Always remember there is nothing that takes the place of a good exercise regime that utilizes both cardiovascular and strength training.

With this information at hand, and if you still want to give the toning shoe fad a try, the American Podiatric Medical Association has granted their seal of acceptance to the Reebok Easytone due to its less rounded sole, which offers more stability than the other manufactures.



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