Dear Alice,

I was wondering whether or not toning shoes actually help you be more physically fit.

Thanks,

Trying to be Toned

Answer

Dear Trying to be Toned,

While canceling your gym membership and investing in a pair of toning shoes may save you money, the current evidence on them is controversial at best. Manufacturers claim that lacing up with toning shoes might help people lose weight and tone buttocks, legs, and abdominal muscles. However, the claims surrounding such products don’t have a leg to stand on as there is little evidence to indicate they improve physical fitness. In fact, they may actually lead to a higher risk of injury. If you’re looking to increase or maintain physical fitness, a more effective strategy may be to engage in regular physical activity. Depending on the type of activity, there are shoes that are designed and intended to provide adequate support.

Since their first introduction, toning shoes have become popular and are now manufactured by many different brands. Toning shoes are specifically engineered to create instability, whereas athletic shoes are often designed with support and cushioning in mind. The idea behind toning shoes is that instability forces the wearer to engage stabilizing muscles more than regular athletic shoes, supposedly resulting in greater toning of the buttocks, legs, and abdominal muscles. According to the manufacturer’s instructions, it’s recommended that these shoes be worn for short periods of time for non-vigorous activities.

Despite the toning shoe companies’ claims, the research hasn’t shown an increase in calorie expenditure or muscle toning as a result of wearing the shoes. In fact, some researchers believe wearing the shoes might alter the user’s gait and increase the risk of leg and ankle injuries. It’s worth noting that as you look into new products, it’s good to consider who’s funding the research, and any reasons they may have (financial or otherwise) to produce positive results. In fact, the
Federal Trade Commission, the United States’ consumer protection agency, forced several companies to reimburse consumers for making implausible claims. The lawsuits filed against some of these manufacturers claimed the toning shoes didn’t fulfill their promises or they even caused injury. While these companies have toned down their claims, toning shoes are still on the market.

If you’re looking for a way to tone your muscles, you may want to think about the appeal toning shoes have for you. Do you want to increase physical activity, but slowly? Is the promise of extra muscle use without extra time engaged in physical activity alluring? If so, you may want to think about other ways to easily incorporate physical activity into your daily routine. If you think a brand new pair of kicks will encourage you to walk more or to become more physically active, consider it an investment in your health. If you’re interested in getting new athletic shoes, but aren’t sure where to begin, ask yourself what kind of physical activities you enjoy. Sport-specific shoes are intended to help protect against injury by providing appropriate support, whatever activity you may choose. For example, running shoes provide shock absorption and are made for forward motion, while basketball shoes have high ankle construction to provide support for quick lateral movements. Baseball shoes have a thick sole, while soccer shoes need a good quality footbed. Most sports-specific shoes also provide good traction for the type of environment in which the sport is played.

Wearing the proper footwear not only decreases the chance of injury, but it may also help correct balance. The American Podiatric Medical Association [2] (APMA) recommends that athletic shoes be replaced yearly or after 600 to 800 miles of activity in them. The best shoes offer support to your whole foot, front to back. Shoe sizes vary between brands, so APMA recommends looking for a shoe that fits your foot rather than trying to squeeze into a specific size. In fact, shoes that fit comfortably on the first try are typically the most appropriate shoes to buy. Having your feet measured every time you want to buy a new pair of shoes may also help provide the appropriate type of support, since aging and weight changes may change the size and shape of your feet. APMA also recommends putting shoes to the 1-2-3 test:

- Step 1: Press on both sides of the heel area to ensure the heel is stiff and won’t collapse.
- Step 2: Bend the shoe to check for toe flexibility. You may not want to invest in a shoe that bends too much or is too stiff in the toe box area.
- Step 3: Try twisting the shoe; good shoes won’t twist in the middle.

List adapted from the APMA [3].

If you think that toning shoes are for you, be mindful of injury or any discomfort you feel when wearing them. It might also be good to consult with your health care provider before making a purchase to minimize the risk for injury. For more information about physical activity and muscle use, be sure to check out the Fitness [4] category of the Go Ask Alice! Nutrition & Physical Activity [5] archives.

Alice!
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Fitness [4]
Working Out [6]

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What causes bunions? [8]
Achilles tendon injury [9]
Is it better to be fit and fat, or unfit and thin? [10]

Resources

Medical Services (Morningside) [11]
Dodge Fitness Center (Morningside) [12]
Medical Services (CUIMC) [13]
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