

Barefoot Running

“Barefoot Mike” gets a lot of attention when he shows up at a race. He loves to run. He’s been running since he was a kid. He loves to race. He often competes in 10K races. He’s done half-marathons. But that’s not why he gets attention. People notice him because when he runs, “Barefoot Mike” runs barefoot.

Running barefoot has become popular in the world of running. More and more people are trying it. They love the feeling of freedom. They love being able to feel more with their feet.

“I didn’t set out to be popular,” laughed Barefoot Mike. Barefoot Mike is really Mike Whitaker. “I’ve always been a runner. Until a few years ago, I always wore shoes. Then one day I was running after a rainstorm. I stepped off into the grass. I was trying to avoid a puddle on the sidewalk. I accidentally stepped into a huge muddy puddle. It had been hidden in the grass. My foot was wet up to my ankle. I tried to keep running. The wet shoe made it really hard to run. The squishing feeling was just disgusting. I was several miles from home. So I couldn’t stop. I thought the best idea was to get rid of the shoes.”

Mike took off his shoes. He dropped them into a trash can. “Then I started running. At first I went really slowly. I was watching out for rocks. I didn’t want to hurt my feet. But there weren’t any problems.” He started going faster. So he ran at his usual pace. “It felt so good!” Mike said. “My knee, which always ached, didn’t ache. I felt like I was getting farther with each step. My foot was able to spread out so I had better balance. And my feet didn’t feel all hot and sweaty. It was awesome!”



“There are potential health benefits to running barefoot,” said Dr. Nancy Bower. Dr. Bower is a podiatrist. A podiatrist is a doctor who treats feet and ankles. “Most people think that they need shoes. They want some sort of support or cushioning. They think it’s very important when doing an exercise like running. But really, very few people actually need the support of shoes. In fact, wearing shoes may actually increase the chance of injury.”

A recent study agrees. A team of researchers in the university’s Sports Medicine program recently videotaped people running. They recorded the same people running with shoes and then barefoot. When wearing shoes, the runners landed on the heel of their foot. This is called “heel-striking.” When the heel hits the ground first, there is a strong impact along the bones in the lower leg. The impact reaches into the knee and up to the hip. Many runners have impact injuries. They may have shin splints or knee pain. Heel-striking may be the cause of these injuries. Or it may make an injury worse.

When running barefoot, the runners landed more in the middle of the foot. The foot is designed to handle impact in this manner. Instead of strong impact, the force is spread out throughout the foot. The ankle, shin, knee and hip are protected. They don't get the shock of a hard landing with every step.

"If you think about it," said Mike, "the way the foot works is pretty amazing. A foot has something like 26 bones. It has 33 joints. It has more than 100 muscles, tendons and ligaments. It's made to move. It's made to support us. We're born barefoot. But we spend our lives wearing shoes. Why?"

Dr. Bower has seen some patients with cuts on their feet after running barefoot. "It's really not as common as you would think. When running barefoot, the muscles in the foot get stronger. The pressure from a step doesn't all hit at one spot. The pressure is spread out. It's possible for a runner to step on a sharp rock and not have it cut the skin. There's not enough pressure in that one spot for the skin to break. Calluses help too. The skin builds up a thick layer to help protect itself."

Many runners are interested in barefoot running. But they don't want to be completely barefoot. Shoe companies are coming up with ideas. Several brands of "barefoot" shoes are now for sale. These shoes are like gloves for feet. They provide a thin, flexible layer of protection. They have divisions for each toe. They have vents to allow air to flow over the foot.

Not everyone likes barefoot running. "People tell me how gross it is that I run barefoot," said Mike. "That doesn't make any sense to me. A foot in a shoe will get all sweaty and smelly. A bare foot doesn't. How is that gross?"

Mike hasn't run a race that won't allow him to run barefoot. But he keeps some flip-flops in the car for after the race. "We go out to dinner to celebrate. I haven't found many restaurants that allow me to eat barefoot. I don't understand why. But I go along with it.

"Maybe someday the whole world will go barefoot."