

How Flip Flops Mess With Your Feet

This summer staple might be a real health flop. Aside from the obvious lack of protection (meaning you're more vulnerable to dropped objects, stubbed toes and the like), your favorite pair could be seriously damaging your feet. "The feet are the foundation of your whole body. This is the base of the skeleton," says Jackie Sutera, a podiatrist in New York City. "It's a domino effect... the rest of your joints and bones have to compensate." Like anything else, moderation is key: Slipping flip flops on by the pool or for a short jaunt likely won't cause any harm — the problems arise when your thongs become your go-to summer shoes. Sutera, along with Cary Zinkin, a podiatrist in Deerfield Beach Fla., and a spokesperson for the American Podiatric Medical Association, break down exactly what's happening to your foot when you slide into a pair.

Your Foot, In A Flop?

TOES

With only a small strip of fabric holding the foot in place, your toes need to grip the shoe to keep it on. Over time, that repetitive gripping can lead to overuse of the muscles, which could trigger tendinitis, or the inflammation of the tendons that connect your muscles to the bones. Tendinitis can be painful, and could result in tears or ruptures in the tendons. Over-wearing your flip flops can lead to hammer toes (a contraction of the joints that causes the toe to bend abnormally) and encourage bunion formation, or make an existing bunion worse.

BONES

Overuse can also lead to stress fractures in the bones of your feet, which develop from repetitive trauma without any shock absorption or cushioning. Standing or walking too long in a thin, flat shoe like a flip flop can cause these tiny cracks in the bones.

BACTERIA

How's this for gross-out factor: a 2009 report from the TODAY show and the University of Miami found one pair of flip flops was home to more than 18,000 bacteria, including the dangerous *Staphylococcus aureus* and bacteria from fecal matter.

SPACE BETWEEN TOES

Unlike other more structured shoes, there isn't much material to stabilize the foot while wearing a flip flop. Rubbing bare skin against the plastic or leather of a flip flop thong can lead to painful blisters, which are liquid-filled sores that develop from chafing to help protect deeper layers of the skin.

ANKLES & UP

Because you're carrying your foot differently than you do in a more supportive shoe, you actually change the entire way you walk. One Auburn University study found that people wearing flip flops take shorter steps and hit their heels to the ground with less vertical force, which can throw off your natural gait and trigger pain and problems throughout the body. Changes to your natural gait can lead to issues in your ankles, knees, hips and back.



FOOT PAD

Your feet are in constant motion in a flip flop. And motion creates friction. When your foot is moving around and rubbing against the base of the flip flop all day, it can create a burning sensation or blisters on the pads of the underside of your foot, especially when that friction is coupled with sweat on a hot day.

ARCH

A thick band of tissue called plantar fascia runs from your heel to the ball of your foot, creating an arch. Overuse and lack of support (read: a thin flip flop) can lead to the inflammation of that plantar fascia, a condition called plantar fasciitis, which can cause arch pain. A lack of arch support can also cause the foot to over-pronate, or flatten out.

HEEL

Similar to the arch, heel pain can stem from plantar fasciitis. One of the most common symptoms of plantar fasciitis is a dull or sharp pain in the heel. Open-backed flip flops can also promote heel pain by allowing the back of the foot to repeatedly rise off the back of the shoe.

Not All Flip Flops Are Created Equal

Here are some tips for picking a better pair:



SIZE MATTERS

One-size-fits-all flops are not your friend. Zinkin recommends finding a pair that fit properly, without your toes or heels hanging (even a little) off the end.



THE BEND TEST

If you pick up a flip flop and it easily bends right down the middle, put it back. You need more support than that. (It should only bend at the ball of the foot where you need it for walking.)



IT'S IN THE ARCH

Sutera recommends picking a flip flop with a thicker sole and a little bump in the middle to create arch support.



STRAP IT IN

A thin thong doesn't provide much support, and leaves your foot moving all over the place. Look for a shoe with a strap across the back, or at least longer, thicker straps in the front.



THINK MATERIAL

The American Podiatric Medical Association recommends a high quality, soft leather over other materials to cut blister and irritation risk.



GO SHOPPING

Flip flops wear out — replace yours each year, especially if they're showing obvious signs of wear.