

Barefoot Running

"Barefoot Mike" gets a lot of attention when he shows up at the beginning of 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 and half-marathons. But that's not the reason he gets so much attention. People notice him because when he runs, "Barefoot Mike" runs barefoot.

Running barefoot has become a huge trend in the world of running. More and more people are trying it. They love the feeling of freedom. They love the increased sensation that comes from getting rid of the shoes.

"I didn't set out to be a trend setter," laughed Barefoot Mike. Barefoot Mike is really Mike Whitaker. "I've always been a runner. But until a few years ago, I always wore shoes. Then one day I was running after a rainstorm. I stepped off into the grass to avoid a puddle on the sidewalk. I accidentally stepped into a huge muddy puddle that had been hidden in the grass. My foot was wet up to my ankle. I tried to keep running, but the soggy shoe made it really hard to get any bounce off that foot. The wet, squishing feeling was just disgusting. I was several miles from home, so I couldn't stop. I figured the best solution was to just get rid of the shoes."

Mike took off his shoes and dropped them into the nearest trash can. "Then I started running. At first I went really slowly. I was watching out for rocks or other things could hurt my feet. But there really weren't any problems." He started going faster and then 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 stride. 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 actually potential health benefits to running barefoot," said Dr. Nancy Bower, a podiatrist. A podiatrist is a doctor who specializes in treating feet and ankles. "Most people assume that they need some sort of support or cushioning when doing an exercise like running. But really, very few people actually need the support shoes provide. 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 tended to land on the heel of their foot. This is called "heel-striking." When the heel hits the ground first, there is a jarring impact along

the bones in the lower leg. The impact reaches into the knee and up to the hip. Many runners have impact injuries such as shin splints or knee pain. Heel-striking may be the cause of these injuries. Or it may make an existing injury worse.

When running barefoot, the runners tended to land on the ball of the foot or in the middle of the foot. The foot is designed to handle impact in this manner. Instead of jarring impact, the force is spread out throughout the foot. The ankle, shin, knee and hip 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 and more than 100 muscles, tendons and ligaments. It's made to move and 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 as a result of running barefoot. "It's really not as common as you would think. When running barefoot, the muscles in the foot have a chance to get stronger. This means that 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 the freedom of barefoot running. But they aren't willing to be completely barefoot. The shoe industry is coming up with ideas. Several brands of "barefoot" shoes are now for sale. These shoes can be described as 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 is a fan of barefoot running. "People tell me all the time 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 yet entered 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."