

## From Vibrams to HOKAs - What shoe will work best for you?

By Mark Green –The Body Mechanic



The variety of trail shoe models available now is enormous. All of the shoe companies are jumping on the bandwagon and producing trail shoes for fear of missing out on the fastest growing sector of the running market. This is great news for the consumer. With more shoes available to choose from, the chances of getting one which is "just right" is high, as long as you know a thing or two about the shoes - but even more importantly - about your body!

With all of the confusing and conflicting information about **“barefoot running”** versus **“cushioning and support”** it is hard to know which camp you should put yourself in. The bottom line is that you need to be able to run injury-free. Getting your choice of shoe right can certainly help with this. For some people that might be a Vibram 5-Finger, and for others it might be a Hoka One One. Everyone is different so there isn't a "one-size-fits-all" solution to this question.

There are a number of variables to consider when choosing the correct shoes.

- Aesthetics

- Comfort
- Running technique
- Flexibility in your calf, achilles and ankle
- Intrinsic foot muscle strength
- History of previous injuries
- The type of shoe you currently wear
- The events you are training for (and how far away they are)
- Manufacturing changes

This list is not all-inclusive, but if you consider the majority of these points when selecting your next shoe, then you shouldn't go too far wrong.

Let's expand briefly on each point.

**Aesthetics:** I was kidding about this, but it is scary the number of people who tell me that they selected their current shoes based on colour!!!



**Comfort:** The hypothetical “world's greatest running shoe” will not be good for you if it is not comfortable. Most specialist running shoe stores will let you run up and down on the pavement to test a shoe. If it feels awkward or uncomfortable - don't buy it.

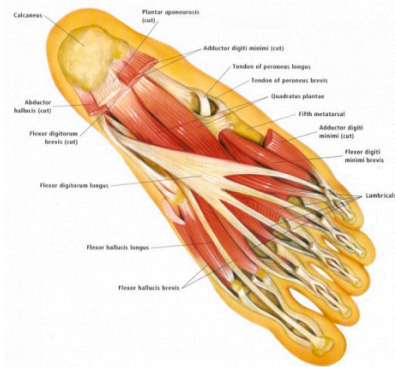
**Running Technique:** There is no point running in a minimalist shoe if your running technique is not yet up to scratch. Running technique should be thought of as a skill that you have to learn. It is not something that will naturally improve if you buy minimalist shoes. Do you think buying Roger Federer's tennis racket will automatically make you a better tennis player? If you want to make the transition into minimalist shoes then invest some time in getting technique lessons. This will help to ensure the transition is a safe one.

**Flexibility:** A quick self-check of the flexibility through your calf, achilles and ankle is to stand barefoot with your feet shoulder distance apart and flat on the floor. Let your knees drop forward while keeping your heels on the ground. If your knees move a long way forward over your toes (approx 8cm or more) then you should be safe running in a low pitched shoe (0mm - 6mm) **[\*\* See below for "shoe pitch" explanation \*\*]** If you can't get your knees very far over your toes (<8cm) then you

would be safer in a 10-12mm pitched shoe. If you are thinking of making the shift to a minimalist shoe and you are not very flexible, then work on your flexibility first before changing shoes.

**Foot strength:** If you have spent the majority of your life wearing thick, cushioned and/or supportive shoes, then the chances are that you will have lost a lot of the strength in the small intrinsic muscles of your feet. These little muscles play a vital role in our ability to absorb shock and to run efficiently. Like any muscle group that

you haven't been using for a long time, you are not going to be able to strengthen them overnight, so don't try to rush it. Making the transition from the thickest end of the shoe spectrum to the thinnest end in one hit would be like doing 1000 lunges on your first ever effort at the gym. After 1000 lunges you would end up with sore knee, gluteals, hamstrings, adductors and probably the rest of your body as well.



Making the jump straight from thick shoes to thin shoes will most likely end up in calf strains, achilles tendon injuries and/or stress fractured metatarsals. If you are looking at getting a pair of thinner / lighter shoes, then make the transition slowly. Perhaps spend 3-6 months in a "transition" shoe while you also work on your flexibility and running technique.

**Injury History:** If you have had a history of regularly picking up injuries or niggles (e.g. ITB issues, shin splints, knee pain, achilles pain) then you need to be even more careful when selecting your shoes. The injuries may have been caused because your old shoes didn't work very well for you, but more likely than not, there will be underlying biomechanical and technique issues which have also contributed. If you always struggle to string together 6 months of uninjured training, then you should see your trusted health care professional (who needs to be a runner) and put together a strategy to improve your body. Throwing more and more different shoes at the equation probably won't help.

**Current Shoes:** Similar to the discussion about foot strength, if you currently run in a thick and supportive shoe, then don't be too aggressive when choosing your next pair (i.e. don't drop too far down the shoe spectrum). Unless you have addressed things like technique, flexibility, stability and strength, then dropping into lightweight / minimalist shoes will cause more problems than it will solve. With the

number of shoes available now, you should be able to find something suitable to your current biomechanics.

**Upcoming Events:** This will hopefully just sound like common-sense, BUT, if you have a big event coming up soon, whether it be your first ever 7km trail run, or your 10th crack at a 100km course, then don't change your shoes in the last 8 weeks. Sometimes it is unavoidable, if you lose some shoes or ruin a pair for example, but in these circumstances try and replace them like-for-like. Any change in the type of shoe you wear will require a period of adjustment, and during this period of adjustment you need to be able to reduce your training volume if required. Not ideal in the lead up to your big event!

**Manufacturing Changes:** This has caught out more people than you can shake a stick at! Shoe manufacturers have a nasty habit of "updating and improving" their most successful shoes. If you think you are replacing them like-for-like, then you could end up with some new aches and pains. The staff at specialist running shoe shops will be aware of these little details, so it is worthwhile taking advantage of that knowledge.

Next time you are due to buy a new pair of running shoes, give some thought as to what you will be using them for, and how your body has been feeling lately. If you have a big event coming up, or if you are thinking of making a change towards minimalist shoes, then make sure you get your body ready for the transition. Work on your flexibility, strength and stability and reap the rewards you deserve from all of the hours you have put into training.

**\*\* Shoe Pitch \*\*** - The pitch of a shoe refers to the relative height difference between the front of the shoe (forefoot) and the heel of the shoe (rear foot). Most manufactures now express this as a number of millimeters. (i.e. 6mm means the heel is 6mm higher than the forefoot)