

The Right Gear for Running & Walking

Fred Klinge

When starting an exercise program, it is important to have the correct equipment to be able to train safely and comfortably. Running and walking are simple activities and fortunately require very little special gear.

SHOES

The most important and most technical pieces of equipment you will purchase are running/walking shoes. Running shoes have evolved over the past 35 years into sophisticated pieces of technology, with several excellent manufacturers to choose from.

First and foremost, when shopping for technical running/walking shoes, patronize a store that specializes in running gear. Running specialty stores are usually staffed by experienced runners and walkers who are able to match your unique foot structure with the appropriate shoe. Running shoes can vary in function – there are shoes designed to control motion, handle larger runners, faster runners, trail runners, and the list goes on.

Even if it's a pair of tennis shoes or cross-trainers, take an old pair of shoes with you to the running store. The staff can learn from the wear pattern of your old shoes and fit you with the correct shoe. There is no such thing as "the best running shoe". The perfect shoe for one person might not be so perfect for another. I happen to have a "Nike" foot, but my younger brother has an "Asics" foot.

The key is to purchase a pair of shoes that feels good on your foot right out of the box. Most specialty running stores will have a way for you to try the shoes – always ask if you can run or walk a few strides. Make sure you have enough toe room! A good rule to follow is you should have about half an inch between the end of your longest toe and the end of the toe box. You should never feel direct contact on the end of shoe. You need this extra room to accommodate your foot sliding forward in the shoe as you run downhill. You also need plenty of width and depth in the forefoot section of the shoe, but it should a snug fit from the top of the arch to the heel – this is where the stabilizing benefits of the shoe occur. "Snug" is the best word to describe how your heel should feel in the shoe.

Running shoes have a certain "bending" point – how the shoe flexes with your foot is important. Make sure the bend of the shoe seems comfortable as you move through the walking or running motion.

Never leave the running store thinking, "my new running shoes will feel great once they break in". New shoes should feel great and ready to run/walk in when purchased.

Once final piece of shoe advice - use your running shoes for running or walking only. Running shoes have a life expectancy of around 500 miles and knocking around in them will wear them out prematurely.

SOCKS

Socks are something we often don't put much thought into. Here in the deep south, the type of sock you wear for running or walking can make a big difference in your comfort level. Advancements in fiber technology have been very beneficial for runners and walkers – many of the synthetic materials now used wick moisture away from the skin and reduce the likelihood of blisters and chafing. Some socks have extra padding under the heel and forefoot to add a bit of “cush” and extend the wear of the sock. Some manufacturers are now making “left” and “right” socks – me, I'll stick with the ol' one size fits each foot. Much easier to mix and match. Once again, a good running specialty store will have an excellent selection of socks.

SHORTS & RUNNING TIGHTS

Running and/or walking shorts should also be comfortable, lightweight, and have the ability to wick away moisture. Most running shorts come with a brief or liner and have an elastic waistband, some with a drawstring. I also recommend that you buy running shorts that have a key pouch – great for stashing your car ignition key or carbohydrate packet.

When the weather turns cold, you'll want to have a pair of running tights. Tights keep your leg muscles warm and help reduce the chance of injury. Once again, fabric technology has resulted in a great selection of running tights.

Running tights should be snug fitting and comfortable. It is important to try them on before purchasing, as the manufacturers have different cuts to suit different styles of runners. The more expensive tights are usually made of sophisticated microfibers that keep you comfortable in cold, as well as moderate temperatures.

SHIRTS / SINGLETS

Microfiber technology has also been incorporated in running shirts and singlets (“singlet” is the running term for “tank top”). Make sure the fit is comfortable and that your arms have plenty of room to move. I recommend purchasing white or lighter colors. This helps reflect the summer sun during the warmer months. Darker colors have a tendency to absorb heat.

There is nothing wrong with training in a cotton/polyester t-shirt. During the dog days of summer, a shirt with high cotton content will retain more moisture and can create an uncomfortable feel during the latter portion of a walk or run. Moisture-laden material also is more likely to cause skin chafing. It might be wise to wear a microfiber shirt during the very hot days of summer.

RUNNING BRAS

My female running/walking colleagues inform me that Champion, Nike, and Adidas all manufacture excellent running bras. The key is to avoid “yoga” sports bras that do not offer as much support as a bra designed specifically for running. Some running bras are seamless to cut down on skin abrasions. Seamless running bras sometimes offer less support, so it's best to try a few different

styles on and run or walk a few strides. As with any piece of running apparel, find out the store's return policy should you prefer to test things out at home.

GLOVES / MITTENS

It's very important to make sure your hands are warm during the colder months. When your hands are cold, you tend to feel cold all over. You can purchase gloves made with microfiber materials, but in our climate, good ol' cotton work gloves often suffice. When the temps get really cold (under 40 degrees F), I prefer to wear mittens in order to utilize the body heat generated by the fingers).

HATS

Running experts agree that hats are important in both the winter and summer. Running apparel and shoe companies are now manufacturing hats for both summer (with a visor) and winter that utilize modern fabric technology. When shopping for a summer hat, I recommend buying a lighter color to help reflect the sunlight. Waterproof sunscreen is also available and is highly recommended if you are going to working out during the mid-day hours. Remember that a very high percentage of skin cancers occur from the neck up! A light colored hat with a visor offers valuable protection from the damaging rays of the sun.

I'm still a fan of the traditional ski hat during the winter months. You can purchase the wool type or spring for the fancier versions using microfiber technology. Keep the top of your head covered during the colder months. We lose a tremendous amount of body heat from the top of the noggin.

CARING FOR YOUR RUNNING APPAREL

I play it safe and wash my running shorts and tights by hand (any item made of microfiber material). Should you choose to use the washer and dryer, please note that most microfiber fabrics will lose their wicking capability if you use a fabric softener product. Allowing your running clothes to hang dry is always a safe bet and extend the longevity of your gear.