

Must read: for all runners, beginners and advanced

Making the transition to *forefoot* running

By Dr David Pierotti

In the past 40 or so years, the footwear industry has swung from ultra thin-soled 'racing flats' to super-cushioned 'stability' control shoes and now back again to ultra-thin 'barefoot shoes' (an oxymoron - how can you be barefoot while in shoes?!). Let's take a look at the keys to creating a real-world approach to effective running technique and maybe even reduce injuries along the way.

After all, the shoe companies' primary objective is to make more sales. Mine is to help you increase your fun running while increasing wellness.



*Do you realise that for the greater part of human existence, we have spent the majority of our time **barefoot**? Obvious exceptions include harsh conditions such as*

extreme cold, heat or chance of mechanical injury to the feet. This included running. It has only been in the last few thousand years, and now particularly in the last 40-ish years that we have become reliant on shoes to run in.

The majority of what I will talk about here is inspired from the wisdom gained from the **barefoot running techniques**.

Let me say straight out *I am not at this point in time a barefoot runner*. I love the occasional jaunt sans-rubber in nice weather or at the beach but I am not a full-time 'barefooter'. Therefore I can't rightly justify writing about it as the next saviour to all runners if I don't practice it in it's entirety. However, I have become convinced that there is much wisdom to be gained from it's principles.

So, I have taken many of it's excellent principles, and will attempt now to integrate my idea of how to improve your technique - whether you're a veteran long distance runner, an occasional fun-seeker, or an absolute novice curious to begin your journey, these guidelines will fit you whatever stage you're at.

Go barefoot first

With that said, the best way to learn how to run naturally and gently is by taking off your shoes and trying things barefoot.

The most comfortable place is the beach or a lush green grassed area. But many of the experts actually recommend you find a harsher surface such as asphalt or even a rocky area. This hammers home (pun-intended) the idea very quickly that you should be using your legs as a **spring and shock absorber**.

You'll get the point very quickly as you *feel everything* under your feet and therefore automatically adopt a shock absorbing style.

Try it and see!

Forefoot landing

The first habit to rid yourself of is the tendency to 'heel strike'. Even the term 'strike' sounds harsh and jarring. The idea is to land softly on the ball of your foot - the forefoot.

“I like the imagery of a plane coming in gently for landing, or the soles of your feet ‘kissing’ the ground”

Studies have demonstrated an up to 50% reduction in overall impact when adopting the forefoot style (along with the other guidelines to follow) and another technique called 'Pose'.

Next, ditch the ipod for a day and listen-in to your running.

Are you slapping the ground? Is there a heaviness to your gait? Get connected to the **sounds** coming from your landing - they will let you know how smoothly you're contacting the ground, and if it's loud, it's probably sending that mechanical energy back up into the joints of your ankles, knees, hips, back and so on.

One way to visualize this is to land in the order:

- #1 ball
- #2 heel
- #3 toes

Some may end up landing ball, toes, heel and it does not matter, as long as the first is *not* the heel.

Try slightly curving up your toes to ensure they don't touch the ground first (just beware this may result in wanting to land more on the heels).

Bend your knees

“This is the #1 **most important rule of safe running”**

Bending your knees is the technique tip which will create the overall most effective long-term injury-prevention and hopefully will help the other's fall effortlessly into line.

When you land on your heels, the knee is invariably straight, so your leg becomes like a pole vault. When you bend your knees, however, you have now created your own cushioning mechanism. You are using the inherent shock-absorbing, spring-like quality of your thigh, buttocks and calf muscles.

You may find that you naturally do away with the straight-leg jamming technique and adopt the bent-knee joint saving style as soon as you switch to forefoot landing.

Body posture

There are now a few fundamental body postures you should use to make forefoot running most effective.

#1 Your head, neck and face are **facing forward**. Do you have the habit of having your chin up or worse yet facing the ground? Stop it!

#2 Look forward, and allow the torso to fall in line in an **upright** position

#3 Arms swinging vertically

#4 Hips in the direction you are running (where else would they go?)

#5 Relaxed calves to allow the spring to occur

#6 Lift your feet early and often. Imagine lifting them rather than them landing. The emphasis is now on the lightness of them rather than the potential heaviness of them. *Focus on the 'foot lift' not the 'push off'*

#7 Use a **180 step cadence** per minute. This is akin to a cycling cadence. It actually creates less work overall

#8 Overall, adopt a slight '**fall forward**' from the hips, this creates your energy and momentum to run forward. The high cadence of your feet will help to 'catch' your fall

Footwear

The recommendation is to use minimal support footwear. Something light and less bulky is ideal - a racing flat is a good place to start. Then as we shed the weight and cushioning we have the 'minimalist' style shoes with the most notorious/popular being the Vibram five fingers.

There are heaps out there on the market now, some better than others. Try these for yourself and make the decision based on how you **feel** in them.

My personal preference is having *multiple pairs of shoes*. A more supportive style shoe and also a minimalist pair. I tend to use the minimal shoes for

shorter distances and the more supportive style for the longer hauls. This works for me. It takes experimentation to find out your balance.

Remember that some folks will require arch support or some kind of orthotic, and this ideally should be tested by either us here at PHT or an experienced podiatrist.

I have found that the level of support required ranges from people needing constant support to others who can do barefoot or minimal shoes all year round.

You must find *your* happy medium.

Tune in

This applies to all things about health and wellness. To understand your body and therefore improve it's functioning you must be able to listen to the signals that it is constantly sending you.

Are you having discomfort or pain somewhere? Do you get blisters at the 3 km mark? Are you stiff the next day? These are cues that you need to alter something to bring yourself back to balance.

Go slow

Why are you running so fast? When you're beginning this new technique, remember that there is a learning curve and to become effective at it, it's better that you slow down a little and listen to your body. Your pace will naturally speed up as you become familiar with the new style.

(please check my previous article on Aerobic training to see why running slow may be your key to ultimate speed in the long run)

B.A.D - Barefoot Activity-related Disorder

I coined this term recently to help people remember that any new training technique comes with it's **adaption phase**.

Your body will adapt, strengthen, lengthen and become more balanced in time.

It requires **time**.

Never run forefoot style before, or in minimalist shoes? Then let me suggest that the first time you give it a try you take your previous run distance and halve it. Did you successfully run 5 km on your last outing?

Give a spirited 2.5 km run a go today and see how your body fares.

The reason for this is the new biomechanics will often result in new muscles springing into life to become the shock absorbers (a good thing!) and may end up in sore muscles for a day or two after as they compensate. This will inevitably fade after a few weeks or so as your body adapts to this new style of running.

Once you have mastered the technique at short distances, begin to

“increase your mileage incrementally”

Again, listen to your body, don't fight the messages it's sending you, work with them and increase gradually as it adapts.

Rest

This leads me to the importance of rest. All body systems need down-time to repair and recuperate. Your feet, joints, ligaments, tendons etc involved in running are no different.

If you decide to give barefoot style a try, the experts recommend never bare-footing 2 days in a row in the beginning.

Take time off when required. This may mean sometimes having a few days or up to a week off.

Listen to your body (I'm repeating myself on purpose!)

How long do you want to keep running for? May I suggest that the main reason one chooses to adopt a safer technique is to prolong the pleasure experienced from a long and successful running career.

To the joy of running!

Dr David Pierotti

If you would like to learn more about bare-footing or other running techniques, take a look at the *Chi* and *Pose* techniques as well 'Barefoot Running Step-by-Step' by Ken Saxton.

All my newsletters, past and present, are available online at premiumhealththerapies.com.au