
Barefoot Living

A handful of students have ditched their shoes, preferring to go about their days barefoot. Experts disagree on whether it's harmful or beneficial to health.

BY LYDIA COUTRÉ

Early on an April day in 2011, Hannah Yackley stepped out of Johnson Hall onto the cool concrete and headed to her four classes like it was any other Tuesday. She skipped just one step in her morning routine: putting on shoes.

The senior Spanish and conflict management double major had agonized briefly over whether she should put them on.

“Eventually we were late, so I just ‘forgot’ my shoes,” she says.

She wasn't alone. Many other shoe-less students could be spotted padding down the Esplanade for One Day Without Shoes, a TOMS-sponsored annual event to raise awareness for children in third-world countries who don't have access to shoes.

But for Yackley, a one-day campaign opened a window into a different world: barefoot living.

As the weather got warmer, she ventured outside more often without shoes.

“When I first started, I was like tip-toeing and then sometimes I'd just jump in the grass because it was too much and now I'm just like ‘Pssh, whatever,’” Yackley says.

By fall, she spent most of her time barefoot, experiencing campus in a

way shoe-footed students never will.

The sidewalks along the north and east sides of the Gym Annex are rough and older than others — though they're no longer a problem for the soles of her toughened feet.

As students rejoice over spring's warmer weather, Yackley holds her breath for a few more days until the melting snow isn't leaving sidewalks wet and cold — she learned that the hard way last year.

And on hot summer days, when the sun has gone down and the air is cool, she takes time to walk on the concrete, still warm from a day baking in the sun.

“I think it just helps enhance life for me,” she says.

Being barefoot keeps Yackley living in the moment. Instead of rushing around and running through a to-do list in her head, she has to scan the ground for any potential hazards and truly feel where she is — whether it's soft grass, sizzling asphalt, cool linoleum tiles or smoother concrete.

Unseen barefoot community

Yackley is among a small group of students who have ditched their shoes. In warmer weather, she sees another shoe-less companion about once a

week. On particularly nice days, she can pass three or four people.

James Benedict, a podiatrist at Benedict Podiatry Group, says he had never heard of the practice until about two years ago. He doesn't see the trend taking off.

“I really don't know why it's becoming somewhat more popular,” Benedict says. “But it's still not popular. I mean it's still a very small segment of people who are doing it.”

There are no meetings, organized events, Facebook groups or club presidents, but members of the barefoot community at Kent State can spot each other with ease.

Complete strangers greet Yackley with, “Nice shoes,” or “Hey, sister.” Odd, she thinks, until she sees their bare feet.

Kim Phillip, junior special education major, met Yackley when a mutual friend told her, “Oh, she's barefoot too. You need to be friends with her.”

“You're going to get those awkward, uncomfortable conversation starters, but it's a bond,” says Phillip, who has also been barefoot for about two years.

She spent most of her time in her Bowling Green dorm room barefoot. She started leaving her shoes in her room when she went down the hall; then when she went outside to study

in the grass; then when she would go on short walks. Her radius widened until her feet only bore shoes when the weather gave her no choice.

When she transferred to Kent State in fall 2012, she wasn't sure how students would react at first, but got over her nerves quickly.

"If people are going to like me, then they're going to like me regardless of if I'm wearing shoes or not," Phillip says, laughing.

She admits, sometimes she still doesn't like people looking at her feet, but showing them off to the world frees her from worrying about what others think.

"People are going to stare at your feet more than they look at your face," Phillip says. "With one of my classes, I would walk in and everybody's eyes would go down to my feet. Like, I didn't know any of the people in the class, but everybody knew that I was the barefoot girl."

Health implications

Nicholas Campitelli, podiatrist and foot and ankle surgeon in Akron, Ohio, says people may look at that as crazy, but he doesn't think it is.

"Your foot was made to work with nothing between it and the ground," says Campitelli, who is also an adjunct professor at the Kent State University College of Podiatric Medicine.

Leonardo Da Vinci called the human foot a "masterpiece of engineering and a work of art." Campitelli agrees, but says it's been screwed up with shoes.

Several years ago, Campitelli, a life-long runner, tried on a pair of Vibram Five-Finger shoes, which allow the foot to operate as if it was barefoot with a little extra padding. After wearing the glove-like shoes for a day, Campitelli noticed the pain he had felt in his big toe for 10 years had lessened. He wasn't putting



“It’s how our foot’s made to work, and our feet love being barefoot.”

- Nicholas Campitelli

pressure on it the way he did when he stood in a shoe.

Intrigued, he started to run in them, increasing the distance by 10 percent to wean his feet off traditional running shoes. After about six months, his toe pain had completely diminished.

"[An assumption] that our society has is: 'Well, I need shoes. I need arch support. I need cushion,'" Campitelli says.

Shoes should allow people to walk on gravel or hot surfaces, but they shouldn't be a crutch. "If you need a shoe to walk, something is wrong."

In fact, Campitelli says, shoes make people walk incorrectly. The cushioned heel featured in most shoes encourages people to strike the ground with their heel, pointing their toes up and jarring the motion's energy into the joints and bones. Walking with a much less

exaggerated heel strike, and keeping feet under a person's center of gravity, can prevent heel pain and will help to engage the rest of the foot, as it should be used. Being barefoot or walking in a minimalist shoe helps encourages this, he says. It re-trains the foot on proper form.

Owen Lovejoy, anthropology professor at Kent State, says barefoot walking will encourage a less exaggerated heel strike, but it would take decades upon decades to have any health impact.

Phillip remembers her calves aching when she first starting walking barefoot. Campitelli says this is because, without shoes, she's engaging her muscles. A burning sensation nipped at the bottom of her soles for the first couple of weeks, which Campitelli attributes to the skin adjusting to new surfaces. Once feet become accustomed to

concrete, it serves as a pumice stone, exfoliating the skin. Barefoot runners tend to have thicker, but softer skin on their feet, he says.

“It’s how our foot’s made to work, and our feet love being barefoot,” Campitelli says.

Lovejoy says, walking without shoes is the natural condition, but not in today’s world — an important factor to consider. When your foot makes contact with the ground, the energy of that movement has to be dissipated. It is split between the ground and the foot.

“Throughout most of human evolution, you and the ground were in a cooperative situation, and now we’ve eliminated the cooperation from the ground,” Lovejoy says.

Concrete, brick and asphalt are hard and immovable, forcing all of the energy into your foot. The bones in the heel are deformable, he says, meaning they change shape (invisible to the naked eye) with enough force. Because most of the ground we walk on is hard and not deformable, we need the soles of our shoes to serve as softer surface to walk on and an energy absorber.

If energy cannot dissipate back into the ground, “it’s going to end up up the shaft of your tibia and into your knee and in your hip and eventually your spine,” Lovejoy says.

Benedict isn’t sold on the practice. He wouldn’t recommend people leave their homes without shoes on. He doesn’t even go barefoot in his home.

“My feet don’t hurt, so maybe I’m doing something right because I don’t have any problems,” Benedict says.

Without any scientific evidence of the long-term implications, he says he’s not sure there are any benefits, but there are plenty of risks — lacerations, puncture wounds, trauma.

Yackley and Phillip have each had one injury in two years. A burr hiding under a pile of leaves embedded itself into Yackley’s foot. She spent the afternoon watching TV and picking splinters.

Phillip was on her way to meet Yackley for lunch when a piece of glass sliced into her foot. She was more upset that she would have to wear shoes while it healed than she was about the cut.

Fleeting fad or lasting lifestyle?

As long as people are careful, Campitelli says there’s nothing wrong with living barefoot. The biggest risk is transitioning too quickly and not allowing the feet to adjust. Hazards like glass, rocks or nails are more obvious, common-sense risks, he says. The risk of fungus, which grows in warm, dark, moist environments, actually decreases when shoes are taken out of the equation.

Both girls carry a pair of sandals with them for entering restaurants or walking along sidewalks littered with broken remnants of the weekend’s parties. Phillip’s dangle from a carabiner clip hooked to her belt loop or bag. When passersby ask Yackley where her shoes are, she casually tells them they’re in her backpack, or they’re at home.

“Honestly, you have to be kind of

bold in who you are and confident to just walk around barefoot because, yeah, you’re going to get asked questions,” Phillip says.

Lovejoy says barefoot walking is nothing but a fad. Short-term, it doesn’t do any harm or any good. Long-term, it really pounds at the bones in your heel.

“My advice? Getover it,” Lovejoy says.

Campitelli, however, says bare feet and minimalist shoes are here to stay. The average heel height of running shoes has dropped, a sign that he says means minimalist shoes are more than a fad.

“It will continue. There’s no question,” Campitelli says.

Yackley doesn’t see a time where she will always wear shoes. The weather, circumstances, social norms and perhaps eventually jobs will force her to put on shoes, but she’ll always find time to take them back off.

She’s thankful for Ohio’s ever-changing weather, which gave her a couple of barefoot days in January and February, but she still is anxious for warm weather to stay. “Sometimes I’ve had to take them off during class just because my feet start getting claustrophobic.”

Phillip’s biggest complaint is that added step in her morning routine that shoes create: finding a pair of shoes in her thin collection that will look good with her outfit. It’s a problem she’s excited to be rid of come spring.

“Your bare feet match with everything.” **B**

“Honestly, you have to be kind of bold in who you are and confident to just walk around barefoot because, yeah, you’re going to get asked questions.”

- Hannah Yackley