

## HOW TO: Choose Hiking Footwear

Choosing the right footwear is the most important decision you make as a beginning hiker or backpacker.....and the hardest. The shoes or boots you choose must be supportive, protective, durable yet comfortable, mile after mile. If you think you have 'problem' feet then you are quite normal. If there is one thing we have learned in our footwear department it is that feet can be a challenge, but we enjoy the challenge and we are good at solutions.



### What Kind of Hiking do you plan to do?

Begin your search for the right footwear by focusing on the category that best matches your anticipated hiking plans. Hiking footwear can be divided into 3 basic categories:

**Lightweight hiking**-These boots (and trail shoes) are designed for day hiking and general rugged everyday wear. They stress comfort, cushioning and breathability. As a result, they are less supportive and durable than the options below. This category is also great for travel.

**Midweight hiking/backpacking**-These boots are designed for more rugged trail hiking with light to moderate backpacking loads. They are more durable and supportive than lightweight hiking boots, but they are still intended primarily for short to moderate trips over moderate terrain.

**Extended backpacking/mountaineering**-These boots are designed for on and off-trail hiking with

moderate to heavy backpacking loads. They are designed with multi-day trips in mind. Durable and supportive, they provide a high degree of ankle and foot protection. Some of these models are designed specifically for rough terrain with heavy backpacking loads. They offer the very best in durability, support and protection.

### **Can't I just wear my running shoes?**

When you hike you are walking on a trail. Trails come with roots, rocks, bumps and lumps as well as water, snow or ice. A running shoe does not have a shank whereas even a light weight hiking boot offers a partial shank in the midsole. This shank helps to hold the foot in position as it strikes uneven ground. This is what we mean by the term 'support'. A hiking boot also offers a beefier and more aggressive outsole which means you don't feel the lumps underfoot and you get better traction. This provides protection and safety, especially to a new hiker. Hiking boots also offer a higher degree of waterproofing and some have a waterproof breathable lining. Running shoes do not generally offer any waterproofing.

Running shoes are designed for running; hiking boots are designed for hiking!

### **Should I buy leather or some other material?**

The materials used in a given boot or trail shoe will affect its weight, breathability, durability and ability to repel water. Since boots made of different fabrics can be very similar in performance, personal preference is often the key when choosing between them.

**Nylon mesh combined with split-grain leather.** These materials are very popular right now as they are lightweight and breathable, which makes them perfect for warm to moderate temperatures, easy backpacking trips and for travel. They tend to be softer and lighter on your feet and take less time to break in than full-grain leather boots. They also cost less. Nylon/split-grain boots are less water resistant

than full-grain leather boots but they do dry out quickly.

**Full-grain** leather is extremely water resistant, durable and supportive. It's used primarily for extended trips, carrying heavy loads and difficult terrain. It is not as lightweight or breathable as nylon/split grain combinations, but it typically lasts far longer. Full-grain leather usually requires a break-in period and softens up over time.

**Waterproof breathable** barriers (like Gore-Tex®) are built into many hiking boots to enhance their waterproofing. These barriers are available in a variety of boot styles, from lightweight hikers to extended backpacking models. Waterproof performance depends upon the type of barrier used, the materials protecting it and how well the boots are taken care of. Although they are breathable, these barriers do eventually inhibit the ability of the boot to release heat and moisture, causing them to lose breathability over time.

### **How do I get the right fit?**

Be it length, width, skinny heel, high arch, low arch, pronation, supination, bunions or long toenails.... we've heard countless stories about "hard to fit feet". In spite of all the problems here are a few tips on finding a good fit:

- When the foot is moved all the way forward in the boot you should be able to fit a finger between your heel and the back of the boot. This means you have about half an inch of extra room in the length which is important to prevent pinched or bruised toes.
- Your heel should not lift up at the back when you walk. There is often a little movement at the back of your boot but that is different from feeling a "lift". A loose heel can lead to blisters.
- There should be a feeling of "space" around your toes in order to prevent spots from eventually rubbing and becoming sore. You should be able to 'scrunch' your toes in the boot
- Your foot should feel supported and cradled (not sloppy or loose). When you step on a decline, your foot should not slide to the

- front of the boot.
- All footwear brands fit differently. Different feet prefer different brands so take time to try a few different ones when you are buying new boots.



**Try on Tips:** Lace up your boots like you mean it! Too often we see customers pull only the top laces so they are snug. A proper lacing job begins at the bottom of the laces and works up, pulling them snug all the way up. Think of your boots as being like a pair of skates. The better they are laced, the more support they give.

Give yourself time to walk around the store before you make your footwear purchase. We'll often make you do this even if you don't think you need to and it's not just because we want you to browse. Your feet need time to adjust to the new fit and to decide whether or not the boots will work.

If you wear orthotics, bring them with you to try on your hiking boots. You can't assume they will work just because they worked in your old boots.

Wear a good hiking sock when you come to try on new boots. (Clean is good and not a cotton). We offer some fantastic 'try-on' socks if you forget and we just happen to sell them in case you need a pair to take home. Good socks can make a 'good' hiking boot into a 'great' hiking boot.