

# A Finding the Right Footwear

**Types of footwear.** The type of hiking shoe or boot you need depends on many factors including type and amount of walking, amount of weight carried, climate, personal comfort level on uneven terrain, and the unique shape of your foot. When you are ready to buy, you can pick from several general categories of hiking footwear:

	<b>Features</b>	<b>Uses</b>	<b>Other considerations</b>
<b>Trail runners</b>	Like a sneaker, but lighter, and with better tread	Designed for trail running or light hikes	Unless pack is very light, not appropriate for long hikes
<b>Trail shoes</b>	Also low-cut like a sneaker, but stiffer than a trail runner and with even better tread	Perfect for hiking along easy-moderate terrain	Slightly heavier and more supportive than trail runners, ideal for a wide variety of moderate hikes
<b>Light hiking boots</b>	Sturdier, higher-cut boots that come up over the ankle bone, often combine breathable fabrics and leather	Hiking in a variety of conditions, including challenging terrain	Should be considered if you have weak or damaged ankles, for hikes in snow/cold weather, or with packs that exceed 35 lbs
<b>Heavy hiking boots</b>	Heavy-duty footwear, typically all leather	Strenuous climbing and backpacking in difficult terrain with a pack that weighs more than 40 lbs.	Heavy, more expensive, and usually not practical for day hikes or hikes without very challenging terrain.

## Fact Sheet

**What to pay.** Your footwear is your single most important piece of equipment. Do not skimp - its quality is vital to your hiking pleasure. It is important to fit your first hiking boot at a reputable outfitter that specializes in hiking equipment and with knowledgeable staff to assist you. The “best” hiking shoe or boot is the one that fits you properly.

**What to look for in a shoe.** When trying on hiking footwear, the most important criteria are comfort and fit. The footwear must comply well with the shape of your feet, allowing a bit more room at the toe than you are used to. The heel of the shoe should lock your heel firmly into place and not allow it to “piston” up and down. The boot should hold your foot firmly, not allowing it to twist or tip over. Your foot should feel good as soon as you put on the shoe, preferably without the need for a lot of breaking-in. Traction is also important. Look for a tread a bit deeper than the average running shoe.

**Ankle support.** Ankle support has much more to do with a shoe that fits correctly than a shoe with a high ankle. Unless you have a history of sprains or injury, are carrying more than 35 pounds, or are hiking in snow or extremely cold climates – try to purchase the lowest shoe that is safe and comfortable.

**Weight.** A pound on the foot is equivalent to carrying seven pounds on your back. Buy the lightest shoe that is safe and comfortable.

**Socks.** Hikers' socks are as important as quality shoes or boots. Never wear cotton socks hiking; they get wet from perspiration and cause blisters. The best combination is a thin polyester or polypropylene liner sock that wicks away moisture from the feet, topped with an outer pair of wool, wool-blend, or synthetic socks for comfort and cushioning. There are many varieties of hiking socks; you may need to try out a few pairs to find the type you prefer. Purchase the proper size socks (to ensure they do not bunch), and buy several pairs. Extra dry socks in your pack can make a wet hike more comfortable. Purchase your socks first, and always wear the socks you plan to hike in when trying on a hiking shoe or boot. Pull up your socks high and tight for a proper fit.

**Trying on your footwear.** Shop in the evening (as your feet will be swollen) on a weekday (not Friday) for more personal attention. Describe exactly what you will use the shoes for, including climate you will be hiking in, distance, and how much weight you plan on carrying. Get both feet measured sitting and standing. You will probably need to go at least a half size or more up from your normal shoe size. Hiking shoes will feel different than ordinary shoes, but they should not feel bad.

Lace the shoe firmly and walk around the store. If they have an incline plane, walk up and down it a few times. Your feet should not slide around inside the shoe, your heel should not piston up and down, nor should your toes press against the front of the boot. Watch for places where the boot is tight or pinches. If you generally require a wide or extra wide shoe, you will probably require the same in a boot.

**Testing for a good fit.** Besides wearing the boots and walking briskly around the store in them for up to an hour, try these tests. Press on the sole of the boot with your thumb; if you can press the sole in, it is too soft to offer adequate foot protection. Also twist the boot sole; an easy twist is another indicator of poor support. Take your time picking out your new hiking shoe or boot. You will be spending a lot of time wearing them, so be sure to get the right fit for you.

If it is a toss-up between several pairs of shoes, ask if you can take them home and walk around in them for a day or so. Good stores will allow you to return the pair that does not fit as well, as long as it is clean and undamaged. Also consider shopping around at more than one store to find the pair you are most comfortable with.

**Slow break-in.** Break-in your footwear with short hikes, going out for a mile or two at first, and then lengthening the hikes as the shoes' comfort increases.

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## **Resources**

Vonhof, John. *Fixing Your Feet: Prevention and Treatments for Athletes*. Berkeley: Wilderness Press, 2004.

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