Think About Your Knees When You’re Shopping for Your Feet

Some shoes may benefit the foot at the expense of the knee.

The shoes you purchase to keep your feet in tip-top form may be wreaking havoc on your knees if you have knee osteoarthritis (OA), according to a new study results presented at the annual meeting of the American College of Rheumatology, held in Boston, MA, in November.

It appears that foot-friendly clogs and shock-absorbing stability shoes may place excessive loads on the knees of people with knee OA, a report researchers led by Najia Shakoor, MD, an assistant professor of internal medicine in the section of Rheumatology at Rush Medical College in Chicago.

“Shoes have traditionally been engineered to provide foot comfort and little previous attention has been directed to the effects that shoes may have on loading of osteoarthritic knees,” she says. “Increasing knee loads play an important role in the progression of knee OA,” she explains.

“Results from this study suggest that shoes can significantly affect the amount of load on osteoarthritic knees—with flat, flexible shoes providing the greatest degree of benefit in terms of knee loading,” she says. “Think flip flops!”

BAREFOOT WINS. The same team of researchers previously showed that walking barefoot significantly decreased the knee load compared with wearing walking shoes.

In the earlier study—walking barefoot resulted in significantly decreased loads at the knees and hips. Certain sneaker companies are taking this lesson to heart. Nike, for example, has a line of running shoes called Nike Free. That are designed to emulate the feel of running barefoot.

While Dr. Shakoor has no specific recommendations for what type of shoes arthritis patients should wear, “shoes that provide natural foot mobility with arch support may be beneficial for some patients.”

One thing is for sure: she says, “These results highlight the importance of re-evaluating the design of modern day shoes in terms of their effects on knee loads and knee OA.”