

TRANSITION TO MINIMALIST RUNNING SHOES

I've bought a pair of Minimal Running Shoes, now what do I do?

Been inspired by the new breed of running shoes, with their light as a feather feel and increased ground contact sensation? If you're starting – or hoping – to run in these shoes for the first time, then you need to do a bit of preparation first. These shoes are lighter in support and cushioning, which you can train your body to adapt to, but if you rush into it too quickly you're pretty much guaranteed an injury – tight calves, strained Achilles, knee pain, and in the worst case a stress fracture.

Firstly know what kind of minimalist shoe you've got. If it's Vibram Five Fingers or something equally firm with just a bit of rubber between you and the ground, you need to allow months to transition. Vibram recommend that you spend the first 6 weeks – yes six – walking (you can continue to run in your regular road shoes), and that's sound advice. Your arches will ache and your calves tighten initially as you start to strengthen and flex the muscles, tendons and ligaments. If you've plumped for a more cushioned Saucony or Nike Free type then you'll be able to get running straight away – although starting short and gentle.

So how do I get started with Minimal Running?

Assuming you've now done the walking bit and are ready to start running – or are starting with the more cushioned versions – make your way to the local park and leave your headphones at home, you need to concentrate on what you're doing, not zone out to your favourite songs.

There's a great exercise to wake up the glutes before running, which will help you to engage them properly when running and reduce the tendency to over-pronation. With feet hip width apart bend your knees – note if your knees move in towards each other. Now tighten your glutes and repeat – you'll notice that your knees don't move in as much. So, to wake up the glutes stand on one leg, rest your fingers on hip bones, bend your knee, keeping the foot flat to the ground and your hips balanced, push back up, engaging the glute muscle. Repeat this 5 to 10 times each side – as is comfortable. This is a simple exercise but very effective.

How should I run in my Minimal Shoes?

Pick a short loop, or just go up and down a path, and start a few drills. Over a stretch of about 30 meters:

- Run with a shortened stride, landing mid or forefoot. The aim is to stroke the ground rather than wallop it, so no heel landing and no bouncing. Feel your head is gliding forwards, keep the arms and shoulders relaxed and swinging naturally.
- Repeat this, but now concentrate on your toes, they are the perfect springs to lever you to the next stride. Keep the stride short and try not to bounce, just gently engage the toes and push into the next stride.
- Try to be aware of the rest of your posture, the shoulders should be relaxed and the chest open – no slouching – feel like your shoulders are leading you, so you're leaning forward a little bit. The aim is to use your toes more and your heels less, which will result in less strain through the legs. It will also encourage you to engage your core muscles, further aiding a good posture and protection for your whole body.

As all this starts to feel more normal, and requires less concentration, try running further, all the while remembering the different points, and see how you go. Don't overdo it the first few times – err on the side of caution – and check how you feel the next morning. If you're very stiff then leave it a couple of days and then go through the same exercises again. If you feel fine, then extend the distance. I would recommend you start each run with the drills above for a few weeks, it takes quite some time to get rid of old habits as we all know.

I'm done, can I go home now?

No. Now you have to stretch! You're retraining your muscles and tendons, which means you're working them extra hard in ways they're not used to. If you don't treat them to a nice stretch afterwards they will complain. Pay particular attention to the calves, hamstrings and quads, hold gentle stretches for a minute – rather than jerking or pushing too hard – use your breath to ease into a deeper stretch; breathe deep and then stretch a little further.

That's it?

For now. Core muscle exercises will help to improve your posture, which in turn will lessen the stress on your body when you're running.