



Style / Footwear

Here's Why a Podiatrist Loves 'Barefoot Sandals,' the Shoes That Allow Your Feet To Move as Naturally as Possible



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Photo: Stocksy / Sophia Hsin



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Heels. Flip flops. Wedges. Pointed toes. Sure, they all look great, but many podiatrists agree: when they don't fit correctly, these types of shoes can wreak havoc on your feet. Fortunately, there's another way: barefoot sandals. They let your toes spread, your feet move freely, and strengthen the dozens of tiny bones and muscles in your feet for better overall foot health. Plus, there are plenty that look cute enough to wear daily or on your [next beach vacay](#) (some even do double-duty as hiking sandals). Bonus: They take up practically zero room in your luggage so you can pack more of what you love—like your favorite [sundress](#) or [wide-brimmed hat](#).

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Experts In This Article

- [Emily Splichal, DPM](#), board-certified podiatrist and human movement specialist, and global leader in barefoot science and rehabilitation at the Center for Functional and Regenerative Podiatric Medicine
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What are barefoot sandals?

It may sound like an oxymoron—how can you be barefoot *and* wearing sandals?—but barefoot sandals are simply footwear that offer an experience similar to being barefoot.

The idea: to offer the most freedom of motion, flexibility, and natural feel when walking. As if you were barefoot, but with a bit more protection—and permission to enter that beach bar with the *no shoes, no shirt, no service* sign.

Do experts like barefoot sandals?

They may take a bit of getting used to, especially if you've been hoofing it in heels for years, but once you do, your posture, balance, and foot muscles will thank you. After all, “Your foot has everything it needs to support and cushion itself,” explains [Irene S. Davis, PhD, PT](#), professor at the [School of Physical Therapy & Rehabilitation Sciences at the University of South Florida](#).

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“The foot is amazing,” Davis says. Each contains 28 bones with 33 articulations, each with 6 degrees of freedom of movement. Then there are all the tiny muscles: 10 in four layers under the arch alone. “When you contain it in a shoe, you start to lose some of the function of the foot. We need to let our feet move the way our feet are adapted to move.”

What are barefoot sandals good for, and who should wear them?

You might be thinking, “Why not just flip flops? Or my pool slides?” According to [Emily Splichal](#), DPM, podiatrist and

founder of the Center for Functional & Regenerative Medicine in Arizona, backless sandals not only result in highly inefficient movement, but can cause discomfort or, worst case scenario, plantar fasciitis.

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“I generally advocate for minimalist shoes for almost every person,” Dr. Splichal says, adding that unlocking that natural movement of barefoot sandals can strengthen not only your foot, but boost balance and offer benefits all the way up your spine. Especially if they have these qualities:

What to look for:

- A level footbed with no heel (zero drop)
- Thin and flexible sole
- Little to no arch support
- A foot-shaped sole
- Plenty of room for your toes to spread
- Straps at the front of your foot and around the back

But she warns there *are* a minority whose feet simply can't handle the freedom of movement barefoot shoes afford. That includes folks with flat feet, severe overpronation, and plantar fasciitis. Davis adds those with neuropathy or foot deformities associated with rheumatoid arthritis might struggle with wearing them, too. Otherwise, these minimalist sandals might just be the thing your summer wardrobe is missing.

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Xero Shoes, Jessie Sandal — \$55.00

Available sizes: 5-10

These cute and simple sandals may quickly become your go-to footwear for summer. They're extremely lightweight but are surprisingly comfortable. Plus the minimalist design will go perfectly with your favorite sun dress or sarong. These are as close to barefoot as you can feel in shoes!

Colors: 2

Sole thickness: 6mm

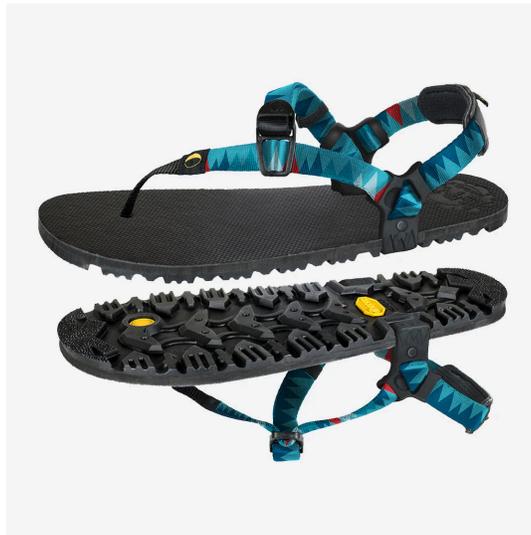
Pros:

- Super lightweight
- Simple
- Versatile

Cons:

- Not as secure on your feet as other sandals

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Luna Sandals, Oso Flaco Sandal — \$115.00

Available sizes: 6-12

Designed by trail runners, these babies are perfect for off-road adventures. That's because not only are they lightweight, adjustable, and mind-blowingly flexible, they feature an aggressive and capable tread and are impressively comfortable.

Colors: 3

Sole thickness: 11.5mm (available in other thicknesses)

Pros:

- Deep tread
- Adjustable straps
- Super flexible
- Softer than other sandals

Cons:

- Pricey

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Bedrock Sandals, Cairn Adventure Sandal — \$115.00

Available sizes: 6-15

The Cairn may be the most ruggedly durable minimalist sandals on this list. Multi-point strap adjustments allow for a truly dialed-in fit and serious tread makes them perfect for adventures that are likely to include forest hikes or rocky scrambles in addition to bike rides on the beach. And, like we said—they take up barely any space in your pack, so you can travel lightly.

Colors: 12

Sole thickness: 14mm (available in other thicknesses)

Pros:

- Deep tread
- Adjustable straps
- Available with arch support

Cons:

- Aren't as flexible as other sandals

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Astral, Webber Sandal — \$110.00

Available sizes: 6-11

For water sports, there may not be a better minimalist sandal for kayaking, whitewater rafting, or wading through rocky streams. The straps are oversized to ensure they stay put, the soles are striped for maximum traction on wet or dry surfaces, and the zero-drop footbed is flexible and oh-so comfy. Bonus: They dry quickly, too.

Colors: 4

Sole thickness: 16mm

Pros:

- Perfect for water sports
- Comfortable, secure straps
- Flexible sole

Cons:

- Not as minimalist as other sandals

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Vivobarefoot, Opanka Sandal — \$150.00

Available sizes: 5.5-11.5

These leather sandals get serious points for style. Plus they're thin, flexible (what else would you expect from a pioneer in barefoot technology?), and wide straps and a to-loop ensure a secure and stylish fit whether you're traipsing over a rocky pier or strolling the boardwalk. Arguable, they're a bit sturdier than others on this list, so if you need a few extra straps, they're a solid bet.

Colors: 3

Sole thickness: 5mm

Pros:

- Stylish
- Flexible
- More secure

Cons:

- Expensive
- Made of leather, which might not be suitable for water sports

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Sanuk, Yoga Sling 2 — \$40.00

Available sizes: 5-11

Sanuk's Yoga Sling 2 makes for a fabulous budget-friendly barefoot sandal that's fashionable, functional, and comfortable. The knit upper is flexible and stretchy, so you won't have to worry about it holding you back or constricting your movement. The footbed is the star, though, as it's made from recycled yoga mats that support your feet with every stride.

Colors: 4

Sole thickness: TBD

Pros:

- Lightweight
- Stretchy upper
- Recycled materials
- Affordable

Cons:

- Not waterproof/less durable

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Feelgrounds, Seaside Luxe Sandal — \$94.00

Available sizes: 5-11.5

Get the leather look but with zero animal by-products with this Birkenstock-esque style that's as functional as it is fashionable. A natural cork insole, an elastic strap in the instep, and a cushioned heel strap with hook-and-loop adjustability helps guarantee a good fit for a range of feet.

Colors: 4

Sole thickness: 7mm

Pros:

- Stylish
- Vegan leather
- Flexible sole
- Moldable cork footbed

Cons:

- Not as versatile as other options

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Earth Runners, Chronos Sandals — \$79.00

Available sizes: 6-16

Stay grounded wherever you roam and experience all the health and wellness benefits that go with it. These minimalist sandals feature a copper plug and a conductive lacing system that literally keep you grounded, even when you can't go barefoot. Bonus: The simple, classic style means they go with practically everything.

Colors: 10

Sole thickness: 9mm (available in other thicknesses)

Pros:

- Versatile
- Minimalist
- Highly adjustable
- Grounding benefits

Cons:

- Run narrow

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Deliberate Life Designs, Pursuit Huarache Sandals — \$114.00

Available sizes: 5-12

These fully adjustable sandals are handmade in Vermont and come in several sole thicknesses, treads, and types of footbeds, so you're bound to find one for whatever level of adventure you have planned. Our favorite feature: you can custom order a pair based on your foot shape to guarantee a perfect fit.

Colors: 10

Sole thickness: 10mm (available in other thicknesses)

Pros:

- Customizable
- Versatile
- Highly adjustable

Cons:

- Complicated lacing system

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