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American Council on Exercise: Study Finds Toning Shoes Don't Work

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By Katherine Hobson

How sweeeeeet would it be if you could burn more calories, firm muscles and reduce joint stress just by putting on a pair of kicks? That's just what [Skechers says](#) its Shape-Up shoes can help you do.



The American Council on Exercise was skeptical about that claim as well as similar assertions of muscle-toning and calorie-burning benefits made by Masai Barefoot Technology (MBT) and Reebok EasyTone shoes. It asked a team of exercise scientists from the University of Wisconsin, La Crosse, to study the shoes, which feature "an unstable sole design" that's supposed to keep your body off balance and therefore, working harder than if you were standing around in flip-flops.

(It should be noted that ACE is a nonprofit that certifies a lot of fitness pros who would be out of a job if we could all get fit without working out. ACE says it commissioned the study but that it was independently conducted. John Porcari, one of the study's authors, says the team consulted with ACE on its design but that data were collected, analyzed and written up with no involvement by the group.)

Researchers conducted two studies, with two different groups of 12 physically active female volunteers in the 19-27 age range. One had the women doing a dozen five-minute stints in which they walked on a treadmill set at different grades wearing each kind of toning shoe, as well as a control pair of regular running sneakers. Researchers measured the study participants' oxygen consumption, heart rate, perceived exertion and calorie burn. A similarly conducted study measured activity in six different back and lower-body muscle groups.

You can see all the charts detailing their findings in [ACE's report](#). The gist: "Across the board, none of the toning shoes showed statistically significant increases in either exercise response or muscle activation during any of the treadmill trials," ACE says. "There is simply no evidence to support the claims that these shoes will help wearers exercise more intensely, burn more calories or improve muscle strength and tone."

Just because the shoes may initially produce sore muscles doesn't mean they work, one of the researchers tells ACE. The differently shaped sole and cushioning will definitely use different muscles than your regular shoes, but that doesn't mean you're working any harder, overall, or that you're going to get toned. "Some people do find these shoes very comfortable," Porcari says. "If that encourages people to get out and walk more or exercise more — fantastic."

[Reebok](#), [Skechers](#) and [MBT](#) all cite research on the beneficial effects of wearing the shoes, but dig into it and there's not much robust, statistically significant, independent data to support

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Health Blog offers news and analysis on health and the business of health. The blog is written by Katherine Hobson and includes contributions from staffers at The Wall Street Journal, WSJ.com and Dow Jones Newswires. Write to us at healthblog@wsj.com.



Katherine Hobson has been writing about health and business for more than 15 years, including stints covering cancer, nutrition, exercise science, the U.S. economy and the U.K. beer industry.

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their claims, ACE says.

Skechers disagrees. The company sent us a statement asking why we "have not reported on the many other larger scale published clinical studies that have found exactly the opposite results ... This competent and reliable scientific evidence supports the benefits, particularly relating to increased muscle activation, greater energy consumption, increased metabolic rates, and the strengthening and toning of certain muscles." [Here](#) is a link to the studies listed on their site.

Reebok, too, finds fault with the study, saying "the bold conclusions made in the article are not supported by the actual data presented" and that the company "has never claimed that by wearing EasyTone a person will burn more calories or that EasyTone is a 'magic bullet' that will replace exercise." The company says the shoe is "a great way to get more muscle activity from your daily routine." [Here's](#) a link to its informational page.

Finally, we spoke with MBT's Lori Yarrow, a chiropractor who acts as a medical liaison for the company and coordinates research on its products. She questions the validity of the ACE-sponsored research, given the nature of the study and the small sample size.

Yarrow also says the new study can't be directly compared to [MBT's own research](#), which focuses on physiological benefits like joint pain relief, neck pain and posture among the over-40 crowd. Indeed, she says the company's shoes aren't really in this "toning" category because muscle appearance changes and weight loss are not its primary aims. "There are people who wear MBTs who will notice they have a difference in muscle tone, but our positioning is not as toning footwear," she says. "It's the same with calorie burn."

Update: This post has been updated to add responses from Skechers, Reebok and MBT, and to include remarks from one of the study's authors.

Photo: iStockphoto

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7:38 pm September 23, 2010

Dr David wrote:

As an Osteopathic Physician and a user of MBT shoes - i can say with certainty:

- a) these shoes definitely change your spine muscle and peripheral muscle use - and in some cases this can temporarily lead to MORE discomfort.
- b) they take several weeks to get used to initially.
- c) They are the most comfortable shoes I've ever owned.

1:41 pm August 12, 2010

Toning Shoes wrote:

Please look at <http://www.toningshoestudies.com> for scientific studies on the effectiveness of toning shoes and rocker bottom shoes. The site includes peer-reviewed studies published in journals.

7:19 pm August 11, 2010

Paul wrote:

I have read a lot of positive comments about toning sneakers, but they are not for everyone. Appropriate footwear needs to be based on your lifestyle and common sense, and not on fads. <http://www.shoesreport.org>

11:51 am August 5, 2010

Michifus wrote:

The report sets out to rubbish the toning shoe claims, and was therefore just as biased as the manufacturers studies. If the report had backed up the claims, would anyone be interested?

It was interesting to read that ACE's Chief Science Officer Cedric Bryant Ph.D stated that "Depending on how they conduct the study, they can prove anything they want to prove." Exactly the same is true of the ACE report, which seemed to have an interest in getting a negative result.

The study put the back and abdomen muscles to the test, which is not something that Reebok and MBT claim and even Skechers don't add a percentage to that claim. The increase in oxygen consumption claim by MBT was whilst standing or walking slowly, again not something tested. Most models claim to increase the pace at which you walk, with the boost in oxygen consumption generated by a faster walking speed, again not something which can be tested on a treadmill at a fixed speed.

The small sample size of physically fit young women also maximised the chance of getting a negative result. One would assume that physically active young girls are those least likely to benefit from toning shoes, having pretty good tone to start with and not carrying much in the way of excess weight. An older age group, with unfit individuals would have carried more weight, and one can only wonder why this data was not collected, or if it was, why it did not feature in the report. One wonders if the data in the ACE study was peer reviewed as well, as surely an unbiased scientist would question the unrepresentative nature of the sample.

It is interesting that the report states that the reason people feel the burn is because the shoes "They feel different, and that's why when people first wear them they're probably going to be sore because you're using different muscles". Obviously these different muscles were not measured by the tests.

Aside from Reebok Easytones etc, toning shoes have many other benefits. They are incredibly comfortable first and foremost, they improve the posture, stimulate blood circulation and greatly ease pressure on the joints. So, if you want any of those advantages buy toning shoes. If you just want to tone your lower body, go to the gym.

7:40 am July 29, 2010

KiLLBOi wrote:

What's really sad here is people ACTUALLY expected these shoes to do anything but cause a bit more wiggle in a womans walk.

Once again something fun was wrecked by a jack ass - yay ...

