

RUNNER'S WORLD

MEDICAL & TRAINING



ADVICE

EDITED BY BETH ECK

On Orthotics

Q: I have extremely flat feet and have worn hard plastic orthotics (three-quarter length) for 10 years. Recently at an expo, I saw an orthotic made of a gel-like material that went the entire length of the foot. What can you tell me about this? Also, how do I know when it's time to replace my old orthotics?

B.F., LOVETTSVILLE, VA.

A: Orthotics (correctional inserts worn in shoes) come in several lengths, from short inserts to full-length devices. And they're made from many different materials such as hard plastic, gel, rubber, fiberglass, leather, cork and foam (the latter three tend to wear out more quickly than the newer plastic or fiberglass devices).

When choosing orthotics, you normally want to select ones made from materials that are neither too soft nor too firm. These are commonly known as "semiflexible" orthotics. In your case (as a flat-footed runner), I'm sure your foot specialist fitted you with a hard plastic orthotic; athletes with flat feet need stability. If you were to wear a softer insert, such as a gel orthotic, your foot would tend to "sink" into the material, which could cause biomechanical problems. Full-length orthotics are commonly prescribed to reduce foot irritation and sliding inside the running shoe. These

would probably be fine for you.

To determine whether you need new orthotics, I recommend using the "rocker test." Place the orthotic on a flat surface and press one thumb onto the heel. Then press your other thumb onto the area where the big toe rests. When you alternate pushing down with each thumb, the orthotic should stay flat on the surface. If it rocks from side to side or front to back, it's probably time for a new pair. You should replace your orthotics if they are cracked, warped, flat or mushy.

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