

The Sports Doctor: Use rocker bottom shoes sparingly

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Rocker shoes should be used as a fitness tool, not for general use, says Dr. Weil.

You've got to love the "hula hoop"-like hype about the fitness, rocker bottom tone shoes. Here I shed some light on the facts and fiction about them.

So many companies have jumped on the bandwagon, and high-profile celebrities and athletes have endorsed them, so it's easy to become confused as to what's real and what's great marketing.

For decades, I've watched the therapy and performance industry use balance and imbalance as effective ways to strengthen small stabilizer muscle groups that surround the joints of the feet, ankles, knees, hips and spine. Balancing on teeter-totter boards, bosu platforms, and mini-trampolines are good examples of what I've characterized as "instability training." Physical therapists call these balance procedures proprioception, the body's ability to stabilize itself in space, (balancing on one foot, with and without eyes open is a good example of proprioception).

In the decades I spent with world-renowned kinesiologist and sports therapist, Bob Gajda, he always would include instability exercises whether he was working with the best athletes in the world or senior citizens.

The concept of these rocker bottom shoes is to initiate this same imbalance or instability with every step, challenging your body to use these stabilizers and increase balance, and strength around your joints, all good ideas. Also muscles are used slightly differently, giving an "exercise or toning effect."

The concern I have is when the shoes are used routinely, a lot and all the time, they can cause stress to the same postural areas such as knees and back, especially if there is history of problems.

So far, various therapy and doctors groups haven't been impressed with true muscle tone or fitness improvements with these shoes that are anywhere near the marketing claims made by all these celebrity endorsers. (What else is new?) Here, however, is some solid, fact-based information about these shoes.

1. At most levels, from kids who play sports, to seniors trying to prevent falls, these shoes can have a productive role. The key is to use them as a fitness tool, on occasion, starting gradually.

2. Example: During your gym workout, during some of your walks, and not all the time initially.
3. If you have a history of joint problems, arthritis, postural concerns, check with your health care provider. History of foot problems are also important.
4. Don't expect these shoes to "get you into shape" or replace your proper exercise program.

High-performance athletes looking to change some of the balance forces around the lower extremities can get some benefit. My advice? Mix them into your fitness routine for some productive variety, just don't live in them, especially in the beginning. After that, "listen to your body."

Dr. Robert Weil is a sports podiatrist from Naperville with an office in Aurora. You can hear him on his weekly radio show at 6:30 p.m. Thursdays on 90.9-FM. Contact him at drweilsportsdoctor@yahoo.com and visit his website at sportsdoctorradio.com.