

CHAPTER 13

Things To Consider When Choosing Hiking Footwear



So many factors go into choosing the right hiking footwear that it can be a little overwhelming. But if you take the time to thoroughly consider your options and how they can help or hinder you on the trail, both you and your feet will be much happier on your hikes.

1. COMFORT

Comfort is a huge factor in choosing hiking footwear, but comfort can be a very individual consideration, based on the anatomy of your foot. Ideally, you can try on various brands and models of both shoes and boots to determine what works best for you.

Overall, lighter hiking boots or hiking shoes will be more comfortable than stiff hiking boots, especially on shorter hikes. But without as much support as stiff hiking boots, flexible boots actually will end up feeling less comfortable over longer distances.

For hiking footwear to be comfortable, new shoes and boots require a break-in period. Generally, hiking shoes and light hiking boots will require a much shorter timeframe to break in than the sturdiest hiking boots. If you are planning to do a long-distance hike with hiking boots, you'll want to give yourself plenty of time to break them in on shorter trails before you head out into the backcountry.

2. WEIGHT

A potentially overlooked factor in choosing hiking footwear is the weight of the boots, shoes, or sandals. Those same sturdy soles that keep your feet stable also tend to be heavier than the lighter, more flexible soles of hiking shoes or trail runners. Your legs have to lift your hiking boot each time you take a step, so heavier footwear can contribute to fatigue over time. Also, if you have different pairs of shoes and plan to carry your boots on or in your pack at times, you'll be carrying extra weight with heavier boots and shoes.

3. TYPE OF SOLE

The sole is the bottom part of the shoe that supports your foot. The soles of hiking footwear range from rigid to flexible. Hiking boots tend to be more rigid for extra support while trail runners are much more flexible. Rigid soles require longer to break in but are more durable and better for long hikes with a heavy pack. It's a good idea to try out some sturdier and stiffer boots to compare to more flexible hiking shoes to see what feels best on your feet. While you might think hiking sandals would be extremely flexible, some of them actually have very sturdy soles to provide support.

4. TRACTION

Speaking of soles, traction is an important consideration to pay attention to in your hiking footwear. While pretty much all boots, shoes, and sandals designed for hiking should have decent traction, they will have different treads. You'll need more traction, such as Vibram soles and sticky rubber, for rocky trails, as well as for wet conditions. For trails that are primarily dirt, you can choose shoes with less intense traction.

5. PRICE

Hiking footwear is generally not cheap, but it is an investment worth making. High quality, well-designed footwear will keep your feet happy on the trail and help keep you safe on your adventure. Make sure to balance your budget with your comfort and safety when deciding which type of hiking footwear is right for you.

6. SIZE

It is often recommended to buy your hiking footwear in a half size larger than your normal street shoes. Your feet tend to swell on the trail, and a slightly bigger boot will provide room to accommodate the swelling. Wearing a half size up in your hiking shoes will also let you wear thicker hiking socks.

7. WATERPROOFING

If you plan to hike a lot in rainy or even snowy conditions, you'll want to think about water protection when choosing your hiking footwear. Water resistant boots are designed to repel water but won't completely protect you in torrential downpours or when wading through puddles or even creeks and rivers. Waterproof hiking boots have a liner that will keep your feet dry through these conditions (unless water enters the boot from the ankle).

8. BREATHABILITY

On the flip side of water protection is breathability, and you usually have to make a tradeoff between the two features. If your hikes will primarily be in warm and dry conditions, breathability will be much more important to you than waterproofing. Ventilation will help keep your feet dry when they sweat, though mesh and other ventilated areas will let in more water from outside elements.

9. DURABILITY

Another thing to think about when choosing hiking footwear is durability. Hiking boots and shoes will definitely take a beating on the trail, and you certainly don't want to constantly replace them due to wear and tear.

Hiking boots	Extremely durable (will last ~1000 miles)
Hiking shoes	Durable (will last ~750 miles)
Trail runners	Less durable (will last ~500 miles)
Hiking Sandals	Less durable

10. ANKLE SUPPORT

One of the main differences between the types of hiking footwear is ankle support. Spraining an ankle in the middle of your hike is not fun and could also leave you stranded. Hiking boots have higher ankles than hiking shoes and will provide the most support. If you plan to do a lot of backpacking, which means long distances carrying a heavy load, you will definitely appreciate the ankle support. Ankle support is also important if you plan to do a lot of hiking on uneven terrain like rocky trails.

11. VERSATILITY

A final factor to keep in mind when choosing hiking footwear is versatility. A lot of the pros and cons of certain choices depend on the conditions you'll be in, and if you plan to hike in a lot of different

environments, you might want to compromise on a versatile boot or shoe that will be pretty good at everything, but maybe not the best in all conditions. Or, if you have a bigger budget, you can buy multiple types of hiking footwear, and then wear the best one for each adventure you take.