

Reebok's EasyTone technology has been under fire recently.
Photo: Bloomberg



Get a grip – it's mostly hype

Sasha Gonzales
healthpost@scmp.com

Maya Calica, a journalist in her 40s, is passionate about her sequined FitFlop sandals, and not just because they look good. She claims they help her move more quickly and are so comfortable that she prefers them to sneakers for her daily walk. "I can't tell if it's the sandals doing it, as I run and do yoga as well, but I definitely move faster and more energetically in them," she says.

Calica isn't alone in her devotion to the FitFlop and its "Microwobbleboard" midsole. When it launched in 2007, sales of the brand's "toning" sandals, boots and shoes soared. Since then, other firms have released their own version of toning footwear, which claim to create instability that makes your muscles work harder.

Today, you can find a plethora of fashion-forward styles from Reebok, New Balance, MBT, Skechers and Crocs. Dr Yeung Yeung, a specialist in orthopaedics and traumatology from Asia Medical Specialists, says that the idea behind toning shoes originated from the rocker-bottom shoe designed for orthopaedic use, which came out in the 1990s. The thick but rounded base assists patients whose normal heel-to-toe gait, or walking pattern, is affected by degenerative foot or ankle problems. The design helps the

patient walk normally without stressing the afflicted joint.

This rocker-bottom technology is also behind the success of toning shoes. Podiatrist Douglas Horne, from Douglas Horne Podiatry Services, says: "The claims of these types of shoes is that, through utilisation of components in the shoes that make them a little unstable, your muscle function increases, which in turn tones your buttocks and thighs."

But is there truth in the claims? Two weeks ago, Reebok agreed to pay US\$25 million in customer refunds for their deceptively advertised toning shoes, as part of a settlement agreement with the Federal Trade Commission, the US competition watchdog and consumer protection agency. (Hongkongers may be able to get the refund – the request form on www.reeboksettlement.com/ftc allows customers from more than 100 countries to apply for it.)

According to the FTC complaint, Reebok made unsupported claims in ads that walking in its EasyTone shoes and running in its RunTone shoes strengthened and toned key leg and buttock muscles more than regular shoes.

But Reebok is sticking to its guns. "Settling does not mean we agreed with the FTC's allegations; we do not," says a statement on the company's website. "We fully stand behind our EasyTone technology – the first shoe in the toning category inspired by balance-ball training."

In recent months, Skechers and New Balance have had lawsuits filed against them in the US claiming false advertising. Sales of toning shoes have also fallen dramatically – sales of Skechers shoes have dropped 14 per cent in the last year.

Horne, who specialises in lower limb biomechanics, says most scientific evidence is produced by the shoe companies themselves. "While there may be a kernel of



While there may be a kernel of truth in this science, I believe the effect is minimal and the rest is advertising

DOUGLAS HORNE, PODIATRIST

truth in this science, I believe the effect is minimal and the rest is advertising," he says.

Both Yeung and Horne believe that the problems associated with toning shoes far outweigh the benefits. This is especially true if you have weak ankle muscles or suffer from recurrent ankle sprain. "The thick round-bottomed soles may actually precipitate another ankle injury," Yeung warns, "although this hasn't been fully investigated".

Horne says: "I see patients

whose foot pain or ankle issues stem from muscle imbalance and particularly tight calf muscles. If you wear unstable shoes that make your muscles work harder, the problems can be exacerbated."

Personal trainer Li Si Yang, of Journey To Fitness, agrees. "It can cause injuries because most people are not used to the instability of toning shoes. Also, if you have poor posture or any misalignments, the shoes will only reinforce these issues, not improve them," she says.

A study conducted last year by exercise physiologists at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse found that it did not matter whether you wore regular sports shoes or three different models of toning shoes; you still burned the same number of calories, and muscle activation remained unchanged.

John Mercer, a professor of biomechanics at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, also ran a study on toning shoes and concluded that his subjects' muscle activation and oxygen consumption were no different from when they wore regular walking shoes. In fact, the rocker-bottom design did not even make a difference in how they moved.

Toning shoes may be helpful in that they get you off the couch and walking, but it's no substitute for good old-fashioned cardio. "Sure, everybody wants a quick fix, but a 10-minute uphill walk or climbing a few flights of stairs every day will not

only tone your buttocks and thighs, it also burns calories," Horne says.

Yang points out that the only reason you would lose weight wearing toning shoes is because you are walking and burning calories. "You can get the same results from any type of shoe," she says.

According to Yeung and Horne, the best walking or running shoes should have a firm, supportive base for a stable landing; heel padding or air cushioning for shock absorbance on heel landing; adequate forefoot width so your toes have room to move; mild medial arch support so you can adjust the mid-foot loading and springing; a good gripping sole to prevent slipping; and firm side support to prevent sideways strain and ankle sprain.

That said, Horne says he does advise his clients to try the FitFlop sandal as an alternative to the classic flip-flop. "The heel is slightly raised and the heel contour is slightly cupped, which offers more stability than regular flip-flops. Plus, flip-flops offer zero cushioning," he says.

But before you buy into the toning shoe trend, Yeung says it might help to check in with your podiatrist. "I suggest a proper analysis of your ankle and foot condition first. If you have weak ankles, speak to your podiatrist about strengthening this part of your leg before wearing toning shoes."