

Rocker Evolution to Rocker Confusion

With the advent of toning shoes, there is much buzz about rocker soles. Rocker soles are not a new concept and have been used for years by the Pedorthic industry for medical purposes. Not all rockers are created equal and it's important to understand the differences.

Rocker defined: A rocker sole simply denotes the curvature on the shoe bottom. It resembles the curve of a rocking chair bottom. The purpose is to allow forward movement to occur with less effort and much less range of motion in the joints of the feet and ankle. Each step, the foot is 'rocked' forward. Pedorthists would prescribe a rocker sole for a client who requires less joint range of motion in the foot. For example, if someone has a painful bunion joint that hurts during the push off phase of gait, a rocker sole will 'rocker' that foot forward, thereby decreasing the range of motion of the big toe joint. Other indications are pain across the balls of the feet, bunions, rheumatoid arthritis, diabetic ulcers and midfoot or rearfoot joint fusions.

Injured clients would receive the recommendation to purchase footwear with a rocker sole which will help with symptom relief. Footwear with appropriate rockers are running and walking shoes that have a thick midsole and it is this thickness that allows that rocker shape. If an off the shelf shoe does not have enough rocker, a Pedorthist can modify the shoe to accentuate the rocker



Line drawing of rocker sole.



NB running shoe with forefoot rocker

Enter toning shoes. Every major brand has introduced a toning shoe in the last few years. The toning shoe has a very curved, rockered bottom BUT and this is a big but, the midsole of the shoe is unstable. So yes, the rocker on the toning shoe will roll you through the stance phase but it is an unstable platform that you are balancing upon. The theory is that this unstable, rockered bottoms will make the muscles in your legs work harder and therefore burn more calories. It is akin to balancing on a wobble board. More muscles need to fire to keep you upright.



New Balance Rock 'n Tone

Recently, a writer researching an article on toning shoes asked me if medically, there was any reason to prescribe a toning shoe. My answer was absolutely not. Clients with a medical need of a rocker will almost always need a rocker sole, but a stable one. To put someone in an unstable rocker with virtually any injury or disease does not make sense. A client with symptoms requires a stable platform where we are trying to stabilize the foot, offload high pressure areas or reduce unwanted motions.

Toning shoes or unstable rocker shoes are for those who want a little more work out with their walking and are fit, healthy and have good lower limb mechanics. They are inappropriate for those with vestibular problems or poor mechanics.

The positive of toning shoes entering the market is that our lexicon now includes the word 'rocker'. For years, we have had to describe this rockering concept to our clients, which now is no longer necessary. However, my fear is that those who need stable rockered shoes may purchase the unstable rockers and worse problems may occur.

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