

CREDIT: JAMES OGDEN / SHUTTERSTOCK



Shape makes a difference

Why do so many consumers say their shoes are uncomfortable? One reason is that they are wearing shoes that are not the right size for them. This can be due to a variety of reasons including a lack of qualified staff in retail outlets, vanity on the part of some consumers who insist their feet are smaller than they actually are and, increasingly, online retailing. Although in the latter case, shoes can be returned if they do not fit, the purchaser all too often thinks they will feel better after a few days of wear and so keeps them. By the time they find out there has been no improvement it is too late to return them, so they must

decide to either suffer the discomfort or throw them away, something they are naturally reluctant to do.

An additional complication lies in the foot itself, which changes size and shape during the course of the day. Depending on a combination of factors such as the wearer's weight and what they have been doing, its girth measurement can increase by anything up to two sizes during that time. Regardless of how pliable a shoe is or how closely the last it was made on matched the wearer's foot in the first place, it will be unable to adapt itself to the dynamics of a human foot from early morning to last thing at night. It is for this reason that shoes should

always be purchased in the afternoon whenever possible.

There is another reason, however, one that is fundamental and yet really quite simple. This concerns the shapes and sizes of lasts on which footwear is made. Problems with fit can in fact begin long before any of these other factors come into play. With rare exceptions, modern last shapes are aimed at efficient manufacturing at the expense of even a generic attempt at a good fit. Basic measurements might well fall within 'industry standards' but the shape is not. In years gone by, it was more like the typical human foot but in an effort to simplify pattern engineering and increase output, lasts have gradually



Typical modern last.



Classic Western boot last.

evolved into the near symmetrical shapes we see today. These tend to be very straight with the cone virtually centred and the bottom nearly symmetrical except for ball displacement. While this makes for easy lasting, it is also harmful to feet as it seeks to straighten out their natural swing.

An excellent example of the benefits that lasts designed around the foot rather than a lasting machine provide can be found in those used to produce classic Western boots. Here, for instance, the forefoot curves towards the medial (inside) side more than a typical shoe last. The cone also slants to this side as it runs forward from the instep to the ball and the bottom radius is usually slightly off centre, again towards the medial side. Backparts are well sculptured, heel widths are narrower and measurements are much tighter in the ball and vamp area.

All this is designed to make the boot fit the foot closely and to prevent it from sliding forward or the heel slipping. The short heel measurement is properly proportioned to the rest of the foot so that when the boot is pulled on, the foot

almost 'pops' into it. It might sometimes be necessary to use a boot puller to take them off but this is a small inconvenience when it has been possible to wear them all day without any discomfort or fatigue. This is how all footwear should ideally feel and it is all down to one simple factor—the actual 'shape' of the last.

Lasts with narrow heels, high and low arches and high insteps would help, but perhaps the most important factor is the alignment or 'swing' of the foot. Standing and looking down at their feet without shoes on, some people may actually see very little medial slant to the upper bones of the feet and the pronation may be so slight as to make the foot appear to be straight or, in rare cases, even supinated towards the outside. These latter cases would not be the norm, however; a typical foot will have the look and alignment of a classic Western boot last. The average consumer will of course be unaware of any of this and will therefore continue to experience discomfort as there is little chance of lasts changing any time soon. 🚫




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