

How to Choose Hiking Boots

Choosing the right hiking boots is a process of savvy matchmaking. Your dream hiking boots will:

1. **Match your hiking ambitions.** Beefy backpacking boots, for example, are usually not necessary if all you are planning are day hikes—unless a backpacking boot offers you the most comfort.
2. **Comfortably fit your feet.** Ensuring a good fit is the key part of the boot-selection process.

More on fit will follow. But first, we'll briefly explain your footwear options. We know it can feel daunting to gaze at the boot wall at a store or scan an online footwear selection and wonder, "Wow, where do I start?" The goal of this article is to guide you from "I'm lost" to "This boot is *perfect*."



Types of Hiking Boots

Hiking footwear falls into 4 general categories:

Light hiking shoes: Resembling burly running shoes, these low-cut models with flexible midsoles are excellent for day hiking. Many ultralight backpackers, in fact, wear light hiking footwear exclusively on long-distance journeys. An oft-quoted theory calculates that 1 pound on your foot equals 5 pounds on your back. While we can't verify the accuracy of this equation, traveling light always feels good.



Hiking boots: This mid- or high-cut footwear is intended for day hikes or weekend backpacking trips with light loads. They flex pretty easily and often require modest break-in time, but they lack the support and durability of stout backpacking boots.

Backpacking boots: These are designed to carry loads of varying weights on multiday trips deep into the backcountry. Durable and supportive, with stiffer midsoles than lighter footwear, they are suitable for on- or off-trail travel.



Note: Some boots, even a few shoes, straddle transition zones between light hiking, hiking and backpacking. Each individual's hiking style determines what footwear works best. If you routinely carry light loads, you can typically consider lighter footwear. Ultralight backpackers routinely wear low-cut hiking shoes, trail runners or even minimalist footwear.

Mountaineering boots: These weightier boots with stiff midsoles are designed to a) accommodate heavy loads and b) accept crampons for glacier travel. Mountaineering boots are tough, supportive and durable.

Boot Cut (Low, Mid, High)

Low-cut shoes: Fine for lightweight travel, though they provide less roll-resistance for ankles and leave feet more vulnerable to debris invasion from scree, grit, sand or mud. A good choice for lighter loads on maintained trails.

Mid-cut boots: These wrap around your ankles and offer some buffer from debris. They're a smart pick for shorter multiday trips with moderate loads.

High-cut boots: High-cuts enhance balance and ankle support on irregular trails or terrain. If you routinely carry heavier loads (40+ pounds) or hike off-trail, they make sense. Take the time to break them in thoroughly before a long-distance trip.



Boot Materials and Construction

Upper Boot Materials

Materials impact a boot's weight, breathability, durability and water resistance.

Full-grain leather: Excellent durability and abrasion resistance; plus very good water resistance. Most commonly used in backpacking boots built for extended trips, heavy loads and rugged terrain. Not as light or breathable as nylon/split-grain leather combinations. Ample break-in time is needed before starting an extended trip.

Split-grain leather: Usually paired with nylon or nylon mesh to offer lightweight, breathable comfort. Split-grain leather "splits away" the rougher inner part of the cowhide from the smooth exterior. Benefit: Lower cost. The downside: less resistance to water and abrasion (though many feature waterproof liners).

Nubuck leather: Full-grain leather that has been buffed to resemble suede. It is very durable and resists water and abrasion. Fairly flexible, yet it also requires ample time to break in before an extended hike.

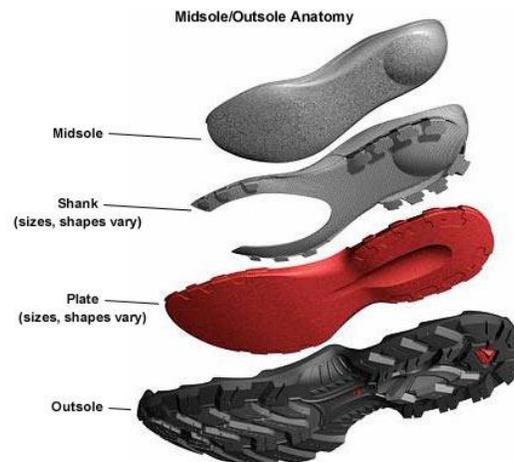
Synthetics: Polyester, nylon and so-called "synthetic leather" are all commonly found in modern boots. They are lighter than leather, break in more quickly, dry faster and usually cost less. Downside: They may show wear sooner due to more stitching on the outside of the boot.

Waterproof linings: Boots billed as "waterproof" feature uppers constructed with waterproof/breathable membranes (such as Gore-Tex® or eVent®). They work well to keep feet dry in wet conditions. Downside: The reduced breathability created by a membrane (compared to the ventilating mesh used on some nonwaterproof shoes) may cause feet to feel warm on dry summer days.

Tip: The leather on these boots should be still treated with a waterproofing product like Nikwax to keep dust and dirt from impacting the waterproof linings.

Different boot fabrics can deliver very similar performance. Personal preference is often the final factor when a decision is reached. It's usually a good idea to trust your gut instincts.

Midsole Materials



Sandwiched between a boot's upper and its traction-giving outsole is the midsole, which provides cushioning, buffers feet from shock and largely determines a boot's stiffness. The most common materials are EVA (ethylene vinyl acetate) and polyurethane. EVA is a bit cushier, lighter and less expensive. Midsoles use varying densities of EVA to provide firmer support where needed (e.g., around the forefoot). Polyurethane is generally firmer and more durable, so it's usually found in extended backpacking and mountaineering boots.

Support Components

A variety of components are used in and around the midsole to lessen shock and provide support.

- **Shanks:** These 3-5mm thick inserts are sandwiched between a boot's midsole and outsole to add load-bearing stiffness to the midsole. Most are made of lightweight nylon or thermoplastic polyurethane (TPU). They vary in size; some cover the entire length of the midsole.
- **Plates:** These thin, semiflexible inserts are positioned between the midsole and the outsole, and below the shank (if included). They protect feet from getting bruised by roots or uneven rocks.

Outsoles

Rubber is used on all hiking boot outsoles, with Vibram rubber the best-known brand name. Additives such as carbon are sometimes added to backpacking or mountaineering boots to boost hardness. Hard outsoles increase durability but can feel slick if you go off-trail.

Other outsole considerations:

- **Lug pattern:** Lugs are traction-giving bumps on the outsole. Deeper, thicker lugs are used on backpacking and mountaineering boots to improve grip. Widely spaced lugs offer good traction and shed mud more easily.
- **Heel brake:** This refers to the clearly defined heel zone that is distinct from the forefoot and arch. It reduces your chance of sliding during steep descents.

Connecting the Upper and Outsole

The outsoles of hiking boots are typically bonded to the midsole and upper with an adhesive. Faster and less expensive than stitching, the use of adhesives creates a durable bond. Just be aware: High heat is the enemy of adhesives. Do not store footwear in a hot car trunk or attic for extended periods or dry boots in front of a fire or woodstove. Doing so can cause the outsole, midsole or upper to delaminate.

Rands

Found on some waterproof/breathable boots, a rand is the wide rubber wrap encircling the boot (or sometimes just the toe area) where the upper meets the midsole. It offers extra defense against water penetration on wet, mucky trails. It also protects boot leather from rocks and abrasion.

Can Footwear Be Resoled?

- **Light hiking footwear:** No. It's rarely cost-effective.
- **Hiking boots:** Usually no. These boots typically lack the structure and substance to permit resoling.
- **Backpacking boots:** In the majority of cases, yes.
- **Mountaineering boots:** Yes.

Fit: The Most Important Factor

While all the variables discussed up to this point are worthwhile considerations, how a boot fits is without question the most important factor of boot selection. A good fit correctly addresses the 3 dimensions of your foot:

- **Length:** Toes should wiggle easily inside the footwear. If you have hammertoes or some kind of toe sensitivity such as a neuroma, pay special attention to choosing a boot with the right length (depth) for your foot.
- **Width:** Feet should not slide around inside footwear; nor should they be compressed from side to side.
- **Volume:** The "bulk" of your foot should fit securely inside a boot's interior. Matching the volume of a boot to your foot is the most critical part of getting a good fit. It has everything to do with controlling heel slip (blisters) and toe bang on downhill hiking (black toenails). When a boot fits

properly it should feel like a big hand is holding your foot over the instep where the laces are. Your foot should feel very “quiet” in the boot as you walk.

Some Tips for Shopping In Person

1. Prepare for hiking boot shopping



Visit a store when you can devote some extended time to the boot-selection process. If possible, try shopping during the quieter hours — typically mornings, mid-afternoons and weekday evenings. Later in the day is often good, since feet are prone to swell slightly as a day progresses.

Bring in any inserts or orthotics that you typically wear plus a favorite pair of socks. Wearing familiar socks can help you more quickly assess the fit and feel of new footwear.

2. Talk with a footwear specialist

Sales specialists have tried on many of the store’s boots and can give you reliable advice on what boots might fit your feet. They’ll likely ask:

- How much hiking have you done?
- What kind of terrain will you be hiking?
- What kind of weather do you expect?
- How heavy is your customary pack load?
- Do you have any special foot conditions that may affect the fit?
- Is there a particular brand you’ve enjoyed wearing before?

After years of fitting boots all shapes and sizes of boots, veteran boot-fitters can sometimes eyeball a customer’s foot type and suggest footwear that he or she has found to be successful with other shoppers with similar feet. “There are times when I can look at someone’s foot and say, ‘I’ve seen this kind of foot before; I know a boot that might be right for you,’ ” says Bob Slaton of Tukwila (Wash.). “A lot of times that works out just right.”

3. Observe your sockless foot

What are its characteristics? A Brannock foot-measuring device can gauge your foot’s length and width, but think beyond those dimensions. For example, if you can see the bones and veins in your feet, you probably have what is known as a low-volume foot. If your foot has some softness and roundness to it, it’s likely yours is a high-volume foot. If you can slide a finger under the arch of your foot you probably have a medium to high arch. And you probably have a flat foot if you can’t slip your finger under the arch. If you have a bunion, you’ll likely need a wider shoe.

“Most people come into the store thinking that their feet are uniquely weird,” says Bob Slaton. “In fact it’s the people with uniform size, foot shape and volume who are the unusual ones. It just takes some time to find the right fit for each individual.”

4. Try on 3 potentially suitable pairs of boots

Work with your sales specialist to select 3 pairs of boots that have the potential to work for you. If you have wide or high-volume feet, Keen boots are very popular and are worth consideration. The European brands—Asolo, Salomon, Zamberlan and Lowa—are often well suited for the individual with a slender, narrow foot. If the first 3 pairs don’t work, ask for another round. Keep at it until you have a couple of boots that might work.

First impressions matter:

- Do your toes or sides of your feet feel squished? If so, the width is likely too narrow.
- Do your heels stay in place when you take a step? If not, check the lacing.
- Do you feel any pinching? Check to make sure your socks fit smoothly.

Ideally, wear trail socks you have worn previously, socks that feel familiar to you. You want to be able to focus on the feel of the new shoe or boot.

5. Spend some time in each boot

Take a stroll through the store. Walk up and down stairs. Find an inclined surface and walk on it. Footwear sections often include a boot-test area that includes simulated rocky terrain and abrupt inclines—use it.

Does your heel stay in place as you walk uphill? If not, adjust the tension of your laces atop the instep and try the incline again. Do your feet slide forward as you walk downhill? (If so, the boot may be too high in volume or the laces too loose.) Do your toes feel cramped as you walk down a decline? (The boot may be too narrow or, again, too high in volume.) You should not be able to feel your toes hitting the end of the toebox. You want just enough room to be able to wiggle your toes.

It may be hard to determine all these answers perfectly during a relatively short store visit, but these moments should provide telltale clues if a shoe is not exactly right. If you detect an odd bump or seam, or a little pinching in the forefoot, the boot's not right.

If, however, a boot feels like a winner, take it home and wear it around the clean confines of your home's interior for several hours. If the boot still feels comfortable, you've made a good choice. That's the goal: to find boots that fit like a dream.

Tips for Online Footwear Shopping

- Consider choosing a brand you have worn before and liked. Most boot companies tend to use a consistent foot model over time, so the fit is likely to be similar.
- Try on 3 potentially suitable pairs of boots; send back what doesn't work.
- Know your size. It's best to have your foot measured on a Brannock device at a shoe store. You can also measure your foot length (in inches or centimeters) and use the online sizing charts to find your shoe size. If this is not feasible, then base your size on your past shoe-shopping history.
- As we recommend for in-store shoppers, wear your chosen footwear in the clean surroundings of your home for several hours. Go up and down stairs, if possible, to check for fit and comfort. Adjust laces as needed. If the fit still feels off, return them.

Some Questions to Consider as You Shop

Q: I'm a beginner. What boots would you recommend?

A: If you will be taking short treks (under 5 miles) and traveling mostly on popular, well-groomed trails, start with a pair of light hikers. For short hikes on nature trails, it's fine to wear standard athletic shoes. They might not stay shiny and clean for very long on trails, however, and if your path includes rocks and roots, you'll soon realize why more protective hiking shoes are a better long-term choice.

Q: Should I choose a hiking boot or low-cut hiking shoe?

A: More and more hikers are shifting to low-cut hikers. They're lighter and can offer comparable stability found in mid-cuts. That said, many customers prefer mid-height boots because they offer a little more ankle stability. Though taller, mid-cut boots won't necessarily keep you from rolling your ankle. Trekking poles are often the best defense against some injuries.

Q: How stiff should the sole be?

A: Stiffness might not sound like a good thing, but on a 15-mile hike over rocky, uneven terrain it can mean long-term comfort and stability. A stiff boot won't allow your foot to wrap around every rock or tree root you step on and consequently wear out your feet. If you're in a store, footwear sections often include a boot-test area that simulates rocky terrain and abrupt inclines. Take some test steps on that space. Plant your foot on any bumpy, uneven surface to gauge a boot's stiffness. You can even step directly on the Brannock device. If you feel each bump on the Brannock, the boot you're wearing is likely not stiff enough to protect your feet on an extended backpacking trip. Also, try squatting while wearing the boots to see if any part of the boot digs into your foot while it is fully flexed.



Q: What should I be looking for in an outsole?

A: Turn a boot over and examine its tread. If you'll be traveling on rough or steep terrain, look for a deep, aggressive lug pattern and a strong, well-defined heel brake. A heel brake digs into the hiking surface and keeps you from slipping. It also allows room for a gaiter strap.

Q: Do I need a waterproof boot?

A: A boot that employs a waterproof/breathable laminate will shield your feet from raindrops and puddles. However, it is not as breathable as a non-laminated boot, so it can make your feet feel hot and sweaty. Many hikers choose a waterproof boot for winter or early-season hikes and wear a more breathable boot during the summer months.

Merino wool socks can be a useful tool for managing moisture in your boot. Worn next to your skin, wool is especially adept at managing both moisture and temperature during activity. Synthetic socks dry out quickly on a clothesline; on active feet inside boots, they can sometimes retain moisture a little more persistently. Since moisture can contribute to blisters, do your best to keep your feet dry. During extended rest breaks, take your boots off (maybe your socks, too) and air out your feet. The goal: Get the moisture out of your boot. At night (or when storing boots between trips), remove the inserts. This promotes quicker drying inside boots.

Q: How do I know if a boot fits me right?

A: Fit is many things:

- **Delicate:** The difference between a size 8 and a size 8.5 is one-sixth of an inch.
- **Complex:** Part of the boot can fit while other parts might not fit as well.
- **Variable:** Sometimes one size 10 works and another size 10 doesn't fit as well, even in the same brand of boots.
- **Personal:** Only you and your foot know if a boot is a match.

The best way to gauge the fit is to concentrate on how your foot feels inside the boot. Does it pinch anywhere? Is it short? Long? Tight? Does it rub? Does your heel lift?

You can test the length in 2 ways: On a flat surface, you should have a thumb's width of space at the toe end of the shoe. You should also have enough room to slip a finger in behind your heel.

Q: How can I modify the fit of a boot?



A: Any of the following could be considered:

- **Lacing:** If you can slip a finger under the first lacings, the boot is not snug enough. Snug lacing prevents your foot from sliding forward in the boot. Many sales specialists know alternate methods for lacing hiking footwear. Ask for a demo.
- **Socks:** Thick socks sometimes may cause your foot to feel a little slippery inside a boot. If so, consider trying a snug-fitting sock with a little less bulk. Loose socks tend to create blisters from slippage.
- **Inserts:** Superfeet are affordable orthotics and a top-selling example of inserts. The heels of Superfeet feature a firm stabilization cup that consolidates and optimizes the natural padding in our heels. This aligns the body, corrects pronation (where the foot rolls from the outer edge of the heel toward the inner edge of the forefoot) and supination (an inside-to-outside tilt) and wards off fatigue. Another footbed, SOLE, is also popular. Sports-oriented SOLE does a nice job of accommodating higher arches and offer a slightly cushier feel. Both are superior to the no-frills inserts included with hiking footwear and are good alternatives to costlier custom orthotics.

Q: How should I break in my new boots?

A: Most modern boots can go from box to trail without any adverse effects, though it's always best to get familiar with new footwear during short periods of time around the house. This approach minimizes any sore spots you might find during a longer day hike. Old-school methods of breaking in boots, such as soaking boots in water before hiking in them, are now considered obsolete and can potentially damage boots.

Ideally, take your new boots home and walk around the house for several days. Wear them as much as you can before the hike so that by the time your trip rolls around your feet feel accustomed to the footwear.

Depending on how serious of a trip you have planned, consider simulating the hiking experience by walking around the house or neighborhood wearing a weighted pack. The goal: Get your feet familiar with the boots and the load you expect them to support.

Q: What can I do to keep my feet comfortable on the trail?

A: One common mistake before starting a hike is, strangely enough, forgetting to clip your toenails. Try clipping them quite short. Banging your toes against the end of a stiff boot could leave you with some homely toenails.

Blister prevention is another issue. Friction is the primary cause of blisters, so wear boots that fit and socks that won't rub. Carry moleskin in your first-aid kit. This soft, cottony fabric with an adhesive backing can protect your feet from blisters. (Often the best approach to a blister is to encircle the hot spot with a donut ring of moleskin.) Rubbing a thin layer of petroleum jelly between your toes can also help prevent blisters.

Invest in some good hiking socks. Merino wool is a great material; synthetics are good, too. Always avoid cotton athletic socks. They retain moisture that can lead to blisters.

Q: How do I take care of my boots?

A: Two rules: All boots should receive a waterproofing treatment (even those with waterproof linings), and it's important to keep your boots clean.



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