



I just bought a new pair of FiveFingers - one of the many new minimalist running shoes (MRS) that have flooded the market in the last several years. After decades of adding cushioning (from air to gel to springs) the shoe manufacturers are now going with the “less is better” approach. There are a lot of stories out there about how these MRS can make you run faster or result in fewer injuries. So, I decided to find out for myself.

You’re probably asking yourself “what exactly is a MRS?” These shoes get their name from having minimal support and cushioning. There’s no true specifications for MRS but most are extremely lightweight, low to the ground, and flexible. In addition, they have little to no cushioning in the heels and have a low slope from the heel to the toe – called the heel-toe drop - that makes them look more like the old racing flats than traditional running shoes. The whole idea behind this design is that it encourages me to land more towards the front of my foot when I run. Sometimes you’ll hear that described as forefoot or midfoot strike. You see, there are three general foot strike patterns with running – heel strike, mid-foot strike and forefoot strike. With heel strike, the runner lands on the heel and rolls forward to push off with the toes. During forefoot strike pattern, the runner lands on the outside edge of the balls of the foot followed by a lowering of the heel and then rolling forward to push off over the toes. In the middle is the mid-foot strike pattern where the runner lands more flatfooted with the forefoot and heel landing almost simultaneously. So when I run in the MRS, instead of my first contact being on my heel, as I do with my traditional running shoes, I land first at the balls of my foot.

I know, why should I care about how my foot lands? Researchers have shown that when you land in the midfoot or forefoot, you land with less impact force through the body. Basically, your body adjusts to absorb the impact in your foot (arch) and leg muscles. And when you do that, there is less force transmitted to the leg and back. Researchers do know that increased impact forces like that lead to a lot more stress to the leg bone. The way I look at it is this - whatever force I can absorb in the arch and leg muscles means less impact force that is jarring the bones in my leg, thigh, and back.

So what about those claims of fewer injuries and better performance with the MRS? I’ve been looking into that as well. I wanted to know if I can run faster (who wouldn’t?) and be less likely to get shin splints and knee pain with these new MRS. Sorry folks, at this point, the jury is out. There are a lot of studies that are ongoing to look at these claims, but no real conclusive results yet. You know the saying - good research takes time. One thing that is pretty clear from the experts in the field is that I need to allow for a proper transition period as I go from my traditional shoes to these new MRS. That means a slow break in period and a focus on strengthening the foot and leg muscles. What’s the danger of skipping this transition? I can learn from the mistakes of a couple other runners that switched to MRS recently. I’ll call them Joe and Amy to protect their bruised egos. Both were well-trained runners who logged about 20-25 running miles a week. Joe basically switched straight up. He went from his traditional shoes one week to his MRS the next – never changed his running distance or bothered to strengthen his feet and legs. Within about 4 weeks he was having some significant foot pain and by week 6 he broke one of the bones in his foot. The doctors said it was a foot stress fracture. Now they couldn’t say, for sure, that it was from using the MRS; but it seems that when he started



running more on the forefoot, without proper transition, he put too much stress on those foot bones until one finally broke. Amy also skipped the transition period but she just kept running with her regular heel strike pattern in her new MRS. Her heel was used to having a lot more cushioning when she landed on it in her traditional running shoes. She ended up with so much heel pain after 2 weeks that she couldn't even run in her old running shoes.

So, the take home message I got loud and clear is that I'm going to use a transition period for my new MRS. I'll run with my traditional running shoes to get my miles in, but I'll follow a training program for a few weeks to get used to the MRS. Most experts recommend a period of 6-8 weeks at a minimum; and some even say up to 6 months. I know there are a number of ways to skin this cat. I've seen a lot of transition programs and tips on the web. The Surgeon General's Office is also working on an optional program that I plan to use. I hear it will have recommendations of how to strengthen the arch and leg muscles as well as provide tips on properly switching to that forefoot/midfoot running pattern.

You probably can't wait to tell me that I can't wear my new MRS to PT formations. I know the Army put out a policy that says I can't wear the FiveFingers in my IPFU. That's because they are the ones that have separate compartments for each of the toes. But I can wear any of the other MRS with my IPFU and in PT formations. The policy is pretty clear on that point. Who knows, after I transition to my new MRS, maybe I'll get a pair that I can wear in formation.

You know, I've never had any problems with running in my traditional running shoes. So, you probably wonder why I would even switch. Good point. For the last few years I've stuck with my traditional shoes for just that reason. I know they're not for everyone. Some researchers even say that your best running form might be in the shoes that are the most comfortable for you. A lot of the runners I've talked to that use the MRS really like the way they feel. They say that it takes running back to its purest form. I don't know about all of that. I guess I just want to try out the shiny new bauble.

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