



# You Walk Wrong

**It took 4 million years of evolution to perfect the human foot. But we're wrecking it with every step we take.**

By [Adam Sternbergh](#) Published Apr 21, 2008

[172 Comments](#) | [Add Yours](#)



This shoe and the stilettos and Adidas sneakers on the subsequent pages are trompel'oeil paintings applied directly to the feet. Nice as they look, you can't buy them.

*Makeup by John Maurad and Jenai Chin.*

(Photo: Tom Schierlitz)

**W**alking is easy. It's so easy that no one ever has to teach you how to do it. It's so easy, in fact, that we often pair it with other easy activities—talking, chewing gum—and suggest that if you can't do both simultaneously, you're some sort of insensate clod. So you probably think you've got this walking thing pretty much nailed. As you stroll around the city, worrying about the economy, or the environment, or your next month's rent, you might assume that the one thing you don't need to worry about is the way in which you're strolling around the city.

Well, I'm afraid I have some bad news for you: You walk wrong.

Look, it's not your fault. It's your shoes. Shoes are bad. I don't just mean stiletto heels, or cowboy boots, or tottering espadrilles, or any of the other fairly obvious foot-torture devices into which we wincingly jam our feet. I mean all shoes. Shoes hurt your feet. They change how you walk. In fact, your feet—your poor, tender, abused, ignored, maligned, misunderstood feet—are getting trounced in a war that's been raging for roughly a thousand years: the battle of shoes versus feet.

Last year, researchers at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, South Africa, published a study titled "Shod Versus Unshod: The Emergence of Forefoot Pathology in Modern Humans?" in the podiatry journal *The Foot*. The study examined 180 modern humans from three different population groups (Sotho, Zulu, and European), comparing their feet to one another's, as well as to the feet of 2,000-year-old skeletons. The researchers concluded that, prior to the invention of shoes, people had healthier feet. Among the modern subjects, the Zulu population, which often goes barefoot, had the healthiest feet while the Europeans—i.e., the habitual shoe-wearers—had the unhealthiest. One of the lead researchers, Dr. Bernhard Zipfel, when commenting on his findings, lamented that the American Podiatric Medical Association does not "actively encourage outdoor barefoot walking for healthy individuals. This flies in the face of the increasing scientific evidence, including our study, that most of the commercially available footwear is not good for the feet."

Okay, so shoes can be less than comfortable. If you've ever suffered through a wedding in four-inch

heels or patent-leather dress shoes, you've probably figured this out. But does that really mean we don't walk correctly? (Yes.) I mean, don't we instinctively know how to walk? (Yes, sort of.) Isn't walking totally natural? Yes—but shoes aren't.

“Natural gait is biomechanically impossible for any shoe-wearing person,” wrote Dr. William A. Rossi in a 1999 article in *Podiatry Management*. “It took 4 million years to develop our unique human foot and our consequent distinctive form of gait, a remarkable feat of bioengineering. Yet, in only a few thousand years, and with one carelessly designed instrument, our shoes, we have warped the pure anatomical form of human gait, obstructing its engineering efficiency, afflicting it with strains and stresses and denying it its natural grace of form and ease of movement head to foot.” In other words: Feet good. Shoes bad.

Perhaps this sounds to you like scientific gobbledygook or the ravings of some radical back-to-nature nuts. In that case, you should listen to Galahad Clark. Clark is 32 years old, lives in London, and is about as unlikely an advocate for getting rid of your shoes as you could find. For one, he's a scion of the Clark family, as in the English shoe company C&J Clark, a.k.a. Clarks, founded in 1825. Two, he currently runs his own shoe company. So it's a bit surprising when he says, “Shoes are the problem. No matter what type of shoe. Shoes are bad for you.”

This is especially grim news for New Yorkers, who (a) tend to walk a lot, and (b) tend to wear shoes while doing so.

I know what you're thinking: *If shoes are so bad for me, what's my alternative?*

Simple. Walk barefoot.

Okay, now I know what you're thinking: *What's my other alternative?*

**G**alahad Clark never intended to get into the shoe business, let alone the anti-shoe business. And he likely never would have, if it weren't for the Wu-Tang Clan. Clark went to the University of North Carolina, where he studied Chinese and anthropology. He started listening to the Wu-Tang, the Staten Island rap collective with a fetish for martial-arts films and, oddly, Wallabee shoes. As it happens, Clark's father had invented the Wallabee shoe. “I figured this was my chance to go hang out with them,” Clark says. “One thing led to another, and we developed a line of shoes together. That's what sucked me back into the industry.”

After college, Clark returned to England, where he started working with Terra Plana, a company devoted to ecologically responsible shoes, and started United Nude, a high-design shoe brand, with the architect Rem D. Koolhaas. Then, in 2000, Clark was approached by Tim Brennan, a young industrial-design student at the Royal College of Art. Brennan was an avid tennis player who suffered from chronic knee and ankle injuries. His father taught the Alexander Technique, a discipline that studies the links between kinetics and behavior; basically, the connection between how we move and how we act. Brennan's father encouraged Tim to try playing tennis barefoot. Tim was skeptical at first, but tried it, and found that his injuries disappeared. So he set out to design a shoe that was barely a shoe at all: no padding, no arch support, no heel. His prototype consisted of a thin fabric upper with a microthin latex-rubber sole. It wasn't exactly a new idea. It was a modern update of the 600-year-old moccasin.

**Next: The unnatural design feature built into nearly every shoe.**

Page 1 | [2](#) | [3](#) | [4](#) | [5](#) | [6](#) | [Next](#)

JOIN THE DISCUSSION

[Read All Comments](#) | [Add Yours](#)



#### RECENT COMMENTS ON THIS ARTICLE

This article presents a view that flies in the face of tens of thousands of years of human tradition...but if theres anything that can be [...](#)

BY [MAJONES9](#) on 06/11/2008 at 5:40 pm

I would suggest that anyone with foot problems read a basic book of anatomy to learn something about the arch. (Anatomy of Movement by Blandine [...](#)

BY [FRPROVIS](#) on 06/11/2008 at 10:50 am

My physical therapist encouraged me to walk barefoot after my ankle surgery. It's been a great help. My MBT's have been a life-saver!

BY [JAVADOG](#) on 06/08/2008 at 5:21 pm

## Related:

- [Archive: "Features"](#)
- [Articles by Adam Sternbergh](#)
- [Table of Contents: Apr 28, 2008 issue of \*New York\* | \*\*Subscribe!\*\*](#)

[Ads by Google](#)

[Advertise on this Site](#)



Copyright © 2008, New York Media LLC. All Rights Reserved.