

# Barefoot, but not Footloose

Gym-goers beware: your feet are at risk.

BY LAWRENCE BISCONTINI, MA

Although cutting-edge, equipment-based classes are among the most popular group fitness classes in clubs today, body-only, barefoot classes seem to have come full circle since the days of Jane Fonda's prechoreographed workouts. With this return to shoeless exercise there are some caveats to consider.

## The Rise of the Bare Foot

Barefoot classes can encourage proprioception and enhance balance. Stacey Lei Krauss, a professional fitness educator and Nike athlete, sheds her shoes in her fusion program "willPower & grace™" (willpowerfit.com), with the belief that muscles in the feet should be strengthened and stretched. Shannon Fable, CFO and owner of Sunshine Fitness Resources (sfresources.com) and group fitness director of Colorado's Lakeshore Athletic Club, agrees. "There's a need," she says, "to retrain the feet to be natural shock absorbers, to strengthen the lower leg complex, and to teach participants to accelerate and decelerate from the tips of the toes to the crowns of their heads, moving as one unit without the shoes we've relied on for so long."

The trend is not just for classes. Personal trainers sometimes invite their clients to remove shoes when training. June E. Kahn, CPT, owner of Bodyworks LLC in Colorado (junekahn.com), says stronger muscles in the feet improve balance and contribute to a stronger base of support.

Barefoot classes were among the most popular at World Fitness IDEA, DCAC in Washington, D.C. and in the ECA World Fitness Convention. To create a more natural state of being, mind-body options, such as yoga, Pilates, Tai chi, Gyrotonic and the Feldenkrais® Method, invite participants to remove shoes. Carol Scott, CEO of ECA World Fitness Alliance, includes barefoot sessions in her highly attended events, since historically martial arts and body sculpting fusion classes utilize barefoot training techniques to increase balance, kinesthetic and neuromuscular awareness.

## When Danger Strikes

Too much of a good thing has its

drawbacks, however. During indoor barefoot classes, participants are most often either on a hardwood floor or on gym and yoga mats. Because these floors and mats get used so frequently in sweaty, warm environments, clubs' staff can't clean them appropriately. In July 2006, *The New York Times* reported that in the last two years, there was a 50 percent growth in the number of doctor visits from health club members complaining of foot-related issues such as athlete's foot and plantar warts. "The likely culprit? Unclean exercise mats," the paper reported.

## Counter Attack

There are two messages here for health club management. First, it is necessary to encourage participants to purchase their own mats to eliminate sharing. Second, whenever possible, it is essential to educate mat owners and the clubs' maintenance staff on the importance of cleaning both floors and mats to prevent the accumulation of bacteria and fungus.

Mat washing can be done at home or with purchased solutions. Emily Dalton, customer service manager for Hugger Mugger Yoga Products, inventor of one of the most popular mats on the market, recommends cleaning mats every other week to keep them sticky. "For light cleaning, mix one part of water with three parts of mild soap (like Woolite®) in a spray bottle. Spritz the mat, and wipe it dry with a soft cloth or towel."

Ready-made yoga mat cleaners are also available. Lauren Eirk, certified yoga instructor of laurenEirk.com at the Louisville Athletic Club, uses Maxim®. Web sites such as www.yogasyz.com sell similar ready-made solutions.

Most facilities have such high traffic that cleaning mats between uses proves impossible. Eirk says that most of their mind-body classes such as "HotYoga," "Ashtanga" and "Power" classes get the mat so soaked that "the club requires students to always bring their own mats. There was no way to dry them out before putting the mat away or using for the next class."

Beyond cleaning sprays, new products on the market address these concerns as

well. Some companies manufacture protectors for hands and feet like Yoga Paws™. While these do not completely cover the surface of the skin or provide a complete barrier between skin and germs, they do provide an additional non-stick surface. F3 Fitness Foot Foam offers a different approach. Developed in German laboratories and made in Spain, F3 is a cooling mousse for the feet that provides instant peppermint aromatherapy and also serves as an antibacterial, antifungal and antiperspirant product. It dries quickly as a clear powder, also absorbing moisture and diminishing calluses. It can be used both before and after yoga practice to promote foot health (www.bernardbiscontini.com).

## The Bare Truth

Barefoot exercise participants need to practice good foot hygiene, according to Diane Berson, a dermatologist in New York City. "Begin with clean feet on a clean surface, and finish with some type of antibacterial treatment on your feet," Berson says. A regular pedicure with sanitized instruments will also help ensure optimal foot health. Finally, keeping the feet dry and sanitized, which includes an antifungal product and changing socks frequently, will help keep the spaces between the toes—a potential breeding ground for bacteria and fungus—clean.

Taking off your shoes to rediscover your feet can lend an entirely new dimension to both your group fitness and personal training. But, proper hygiene to disinfect and protect the feet and equipment will ensure that wellness truly starts from the ground up. **AF**

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