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## Worth the hype?

Fans, skeptics weigh in on shoes that tout toning their feet

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Beth Vos can feel them working.

Sue Bannatyne says she wears them for comfort.

The two women are talking about their toning shoes, which can cost \$75 to \$250 a pair and have led to a runaway \$17 billion market.

Manufacturers say the shoes can firm up your legs, butt and abs -- no gym needed.

Some who use them swear they can feel a difference.

Medical and fitness experts, however, aren't convinced. Some even warn the shoes could be dangerous.

### The pitch

Here's the idea: The shoes have a rounded sole and take action on those pesky trouble areas by creating a rocking motion when you walk. The aim is to replicate the heel-to-toe motion of walking on a soft, sandy beach.

Wearers must work harder than normal to balance themselves, which works the core muscles, abs and glutes. The idea is to stretch the leg muscles with each stride.

The shoes are produced by a variety of companies -- including Skechers, Reebok, MBT (Masai Barefoot Technology) and Avia -- and sales are booming. Experts say the shoes are the fastest-growing segment of the athletic footwear industry, and their success is driven by a customer base that is 90% women, says Matt Powell, a sneaker analyst with Sports One Source, a market research company.

Other companies, such as FitFlop, are rolling out toning sandals and clogs.

### 'Good feedback'

Barbara Raimey, assistant manager at The Walking Company in the Mall of Partridge Creek in Clinton Township, which sells MBTs, says many of her customers are sold on the shoes.

She is, too.

"We've been getting very good feedback; most of the people like them," she says. "I wear them myself, and I've noticed my pants are a little looser in the thighs and waist."

Still, she acknowledges the shoes aren't for everyone. Some people, such as those with balance issues, can't wear them at all, she says.

She also advises customers to not overdo it at first and wear them for hours on end.

"It's just like if you work out, you don't want to overdo it the first day," she says. "Your body and muscles can be real sore."

Many customers who have gotten used to the shoes won't wear anything else, Raimey says.

"We have some people who say that's all they wear now," she says. "I have customers come in and say, 'Before MBTs, I could hardly walk.'"

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## What the experts say

Not everyone is convinced of the toning claims.

Dr. Todd Murphy, a sports medicine specialist at Orthopedic Associates of Port Huron, is among them.

"I'm an evidence-based surgeon, and there's not a lot of hard evidence (proving) what they claim to do," Murphy says.

While MBTs became available in the United States in 2003, toning shoes really have exploded in the past few years. Each brand has its own study to back its claims, but there haven't been any independent studies to prove the shoes have any benefits over traditional athletic shoes.

That's one reason Cheryl Keaney, a Blue Water Area personal trainer, fitness nutrition specialist and weight management consultant, thinks people should save their money.

"A lot of people want these quick fixes, and if they can wear shoes to work more muscles and burn more calories, then they'll do it," says Keaney, who writes a column for the Times Herald.

She compares wearing the shoes to trying to lose weight in one specific area of the body -- something that's simply not possible. Keaney says there probably are some pros and cons to the toning shoes, but, as far as she can tell, they aren't any different than a run-of-the-mill athletic shoe.

Murphy warns people to be careful when it comes to these shoes.

"They can cause some instability in the ankles" that could lead to injury, he says.

Maureen Muzzarelli, Orthopedic Associates' director of physical therapy, agrees.

"By design, these shoes alter the normal mechanics of walking," she says. "For some of us, this may be a positive change, and for others, it could be a problem."

Muzzarelli says the shape of the shoes causes

wearers to use different muscle groups at a different phase of the walking cycle or gait at various intensities. That can be good or bad -- depending on the wearer.

Muzzarelli does see some possible benefit to the shoes -- the rocking motion created by walking could strengthen muscles that don't get worked as hard in other shoes. But, she advises people to consult a physician or physical therapist before buying the shoes.

Dr. David Touchton, a Port Huron podiatrist, says the shoe could help some people, such as those with diabetes, arthritis, multiple sclerosis and Parkinson's disease.

Such people generally have problems moving their toes, he says. The rocking motion of the toning shoes can make it easier for them to walk.

"It does allow them to move over a rigid foot," he says.

Still, Touchton says the shoe isn't for everybody.

"To put everybody in them, you'll probably have half of the people falling down," he says.

## What wearers say

Though local users say they feel their muscles working, none say they need a smaller pair of pants



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as a result.

Most simply say the shoes are comfortable. That's what Bannatyne, 61, a Port Huron nurse, likes about them.

"I look at them as equipment for my job. I don't wear a helmet, I wear good shoes," she says.

Nurses, hair stylists and teachers are among those who seem to be embracing the shoes with vigor.

Bannatyne's shoes are the AVI-Motion model made by Avia.

"The Sketchers looked a little too roly-poly for me," she says. "These had the same basic concept but not quite as extreme."

Vos, 41, an eighth-grade teacher at Fort Gratiot Middle School, received her pair of Reebok EasyTone shoes for Mother's Day.

She has been walking in them ever since.

"I can feel them working," she says.

Vos says she didn't have any trouble adjusting.

"They're really cushiony in the middle, so you have to balance differently," Vos says. "You have to force yourself to stay on top of them."

"I do like them, but I wish they were less expensive."

Less expensive brands, at stores such as Payless, Kmart and Walmart, sell for \$15 to \$50.

Sue Foukes, 48, of Roseville, who was sporting toning shoes during a visit to the Blue Water Area earlier this month, says comfort was the biggest reason she bought the shoes.

"I have bad heels," says Foukes, a dog groomer. "I don't really believe they make you lose weight."

### Words of advice

For those who want to give the shoes a try, Bannatyne advises they walk around the store for at least 15 minutes.

She also walked around her house in them for about a half a day just to make sure she would like them and wouldn't fall.

"They are comfortable," she says. "The arch hits me on the arch of my foot."

But she has no illusions the shoes will work physical wonders.

"I'm never going to have buns of steel," she says.



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