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Wearing Shoes Inside: Are You 'Team Off' or 'Team On'?

Science says leave shoes at the door, but guests deserve a little grace

By Matt Alderton, AARP | 7 Comments
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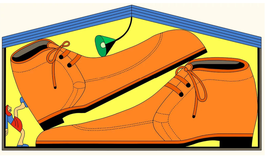

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Like whether pineapple belongs on pizza and should toilet paper hang "over" or "under," people have very strong opinions on whether to take shoes off at the front door.

"Team Off" insists that shoes are dirty, uncomfortable and destructive. "Team On" maintains that shoes keep you mobile and protect your feet, and that the hassle of taking them off is greater than the health risk posed by leaving them on.

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Although there are important cultural aspects to the debate — in much of Asia, the Middle East and Europe, wearing shoes in the home is considered disrespectful — social norms are a matter of opinion. Science, on the other hand, is a matter of fact. And when it comes to footwear hygiene, the facts are clear: Taking your shoes off before you enter a home is cleaner than leaving them on, and — more importantly — safer for older adults with weaker immune systems.

But the debate doesn't end there. Proponents of wearing shoes aren't wrong about their benefits. And in the case of hosting guests, the inconvenience associated with shoe removal could come with a social cost.

Dirt and germs and grime, oh my!

What does the science say? The gold standard study on shoe hygiene is an oldie but still the most widely cited. Microbiologist Charles Gerba partnered with the shoe brand Rockport in 2008 to examine the prevalence of bacteria on shoes and floors.

What he found was a whole lot of ick. After two weeks of wear, there was a significant amount of bacteria on the outside of shoes. What's worse, that bacteria transferred directly from shoes to floors over 90 percent of the time. Among the bacteria Gerba discovered were:

- *Escherichia coli*, which can cause intestinal and urinary tract infections, meningitis and diarrhea
- *Klebsiella pneumoniae*, which is a frequent cause of pneumonia, as well as wound and bloodstream infections
- *Serratia ficaria*, a rare cause of wound and respiratory tract infections

Infections from these and other bacteria can be especially harmful in older adults. For example, a 2023 study in the journal *BMC Infectious Diseases* looked at nearly 20,000 people over the age of 60 who were infected with *E. coli* between 2015 and 2020. Almost all of them — 96.5 percent, to be exact — were hospitalized for about seven days, and nearly a third were put into the intensive care unit.

Gerba's research has withstood the test of time: In 2023, Alessandra Leri, a chemistry professor at New York City's Marymount Manhattan College, studied pathogenic fecal bacteria in puddles on sidewalks outside a building on her campus. Then she looked for the same bacteria on the soles of shoes worn by building occupants, and on the floors inside.

"We found dramatically high numbers of bacteria on carpets compared to adjacent flooring that was uncarpeted," explains Leri, who found 200 times more bacteria on carpeted flooring compared with uncarpeted flooring beside it. Most bacteria was located near the building's entry. "Although it was an institutional building, not a residence, I think the results definitely have consequences for our understanding of what probably happens in your home, particularly if you have carpet."

Suffice to say, Leri keeps a shoes-off home. "I think the obvious thing people can do to reduce their exposure [to harmful pathogens] is to leave their shoes at the door," she says.

Germs can be good

But some experts say the warpath against germs in modern housing is overkill — and a germ-free house can actually be detrimental to your health.

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"It's important to note that your home isn't a petri dish growing scary diseases at every turn," says microbiologist Shaun Veran, adding that exposure to a variety of microscopic beings is like a "workout for your immune system, teaching it to recognize and fight diseases more effectively."

The key, he says, is balance: You want to keep your home clean enough to be safe but not so clean that your immune system suffers.

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And where is that balance? Veran, who is also the COO of OURA, which makes antimicrobial clothing and home goods, says there are three key indicators that your home might be harboring unsafe germs: visible dirt and grime, someone in the house has had an illness, and mold growth.

A good rule of thumb is "if it looks dirty, clean it," he says.

Sole searching

Still feeling the ick? Taking Leri's advice doesn't have to mean going barefoot. Instead, consider reserving footwear for indoor use only — especially if you're someone who is at risk of falling, someone who needs shoes for mobility, someone for whom shoes provide relief from chronic pain or someone who is just prone to cold feet.

Socks or slippers with traction are a good choice, says Kirsten Borrink, author of the shoe blog BarkingDogShoes.com. Her favorites include Gripper Slippers from Bombas; Zermatt slippers and Arizona sandals, both from Birkenstock; and slippers or clogs from Glesswish, Haflinger, Crocs or OOFOS. The latter specializes in recovery footwear and is therefore ideal for people who require more support.

If you don't wear outside shoes in your own home, you probably shouldn't wear them in other people's homes, either. So consider bringing clean shoes in a tote to change into when you visit friends, relatives and neighbors. For something more elevated than what you wear at home, Borrink suggests foldable ballet flats from Yosi Samra for women, as well as slipper-shoes from Birdies. For both men and women, Allbirds and Rothy's are stylish, comfortable and portable, she says.

What about guests?

While choosing indoor footwear is important, perhaps the most challenging thing to navigate for shoes-off households is hosting guests. Following a few simple rules can make the situation more comfortable for everyone, says Diane Gottsman, founder of the Protocol School of Texas, a company specializing in professional etiquette training:

Let them know ahead of time. If you want guests to leave their shoes at the door, tell them in advance so they're not caught off guard — or worse yet, caught with tattered socks, unruly toenails or smelly feet.

Make it effortless. Hosts who ask guests to remove their shoes should make it as easy and comfortable as possible for them to do so. That means offering a chair or bench where they can sit to remove their shoes more easily; providing fresh, new socks or slippers for them to wear while they're in your home, preferably with treads on the bottom so they don't slip and fall; and having a rack, tray or cabinet where they can safely store their shoes until they're ready to leave. Avoid baskets, as throwing guests' shoes together into a basket could be perceived as unsanitary and might cause scuffing.

Clean your floor. If you expect guests to remove their shoes, your floor should be free of dirt, dust and pet hair.

Avoid indoor/outdoor gatherings. Hosting a barbecue? Expecting guests to flow back and forth between the house and the yard without shoes doesn't make much sense.

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Above all else, be reasonable and realistic. "If somebody comes over to visit and you say, 'Listen, we're a shoe-free zone. Would you mind taking off your shoes?' that's fine. But if you have a whole party with people who are taking off their shoes, that's a big ask," says Gottsman, who goes shoeless in her own home but bristles at the idea of asking guests to do the same. "Our role as a host is to make our guests comfortable, and our guests will not be comfortable if we give them lots of rules and parameters to follow. So I really encourage hosts to think carefully before they make that request."

Your best defense: clean floors all the time — even on guest-free days

Whether you're a shoes-on or shoes-off house, regular and thorough cleaning will keep your home safe for everyone, according to environmental wellness advocate Michael Rubino, founder of HomeCleanse, a mold remediation company whose mission is eliminating poor air quality and toxic indoor environments.

"All floors in a home should be routinely cleaned," Rubino says. "Microscopic particles settle where our dust settles — so most open surfaces in a home, including the floor. The more particles there are, the more toxic this layer of grime will be. When that dust is disturbed, it becomes airborne and enters our bodies via inhalation. The cleaner the floor is ... the healthier it will be and the less exposure we'll face."

Rubino recommends vacuuming all floors with a HEPA vacuum at least once per week, and two or three times per week for high-traffic areas like doorways and hallways. If you have carpet, "the more frequently, the better," he says. "Carpeting is porous, meaning it will trap microscopic particles. Lack of vacuuming will allow these particles to build up and create unhealthy indoor conditions."

For an even deeper clean, steam clean carpets every 12 to 18 months to disinfect them, suggests Marla Mock, president of residential cleaning company Molly Maid, a Neighborly company. "You can hire a professional, or you can purchase or rent a steam cleaner from your local home improvement store," she says.

Along with vacuuming, you should mop wood, tile and laminate floors at least once a week using a microfiber mop. "Microfiber is 100 times better at removing small particles than normal material," Rubino explains.

Replace your mopping solution every time you move to a new room to avoid spreading germs around, Mock adds.

Don't forget to clean your shoes too: Gerba's study found that washing shoes in a washing machine with laundry detergent reduces bacteria by at least 90 percent.

"Cleaning shoes can be as easy as wiping them down with disinfectant wipes at the end of every week," Mock says. "Consider thoroughly cleaning your more frequently worn shoes about once a month. Handwash the shoes with warm water and a mild detergent, or throw them in the washing machine if the fabric allows. Regular shoe cleaning not only prolongs their lifespan, but also keeps them looking their best."

No matter how much cleaning you do, shoes will always attract dirt. How vigilant you want to be is therefore up to you.

"There's not a right or wrong," Gottsman says of the great shoe debate. "It's a decision that each person has to make based on their own personal circumstances."

Matt Alderton is a contributing writer who specializes in health and wellness, travel and technology. His work has also appeared in USA Today, Forbes *and* The Washington Post.

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