

UNTYING THE DEBATE ON SHOELESS HOMES

Not all experts agree leaving shoes outside is necessary, but studies showing what we track in on soles might cause some soul-searching

BY RACHEL KURZIUS

Taking your shoes off before entering a home is a sign of respect in many cultures. In other households, it's just a way to reduce the ick factor of traipsing in whatever germs and grime you've encountered in the world beyond your front door.

Whatever their reasons, roughly 2 out of 3 Americans do indeed remove their shoes when they get home, according to a May 2023 poll from CBS News and YouGov. But if you're in the camp who does it for cleanliness, is it really necessary? Turns out the experts don't all agree.

The case for leaving your shoes on

There is some stomach-turning stuff on the soles of your shoes, to be sure, likely including an array of fecal matter. But the grossness we track into our homes is not necessarily a health hazard for most of us.

"There are quite a few defenses that the human body has because we're exposed to germs literally everywhere," says Philip Tierno Jr., author of "The Secret Life of Germs" and a professor of microbiology and pathology at New York University School of Medicine. "Infection does not occur just because you're exposed to a large number of germs."

He puts the probability of contracting some kind of infection from wearing shoes inside at "very, very low." First of all, the vast majority of what you're bringing in isn't pathogenic, even if it can be icky.



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"I used to lay on the floor and watch TV, but I don't do it anymore after we did the shoe study,"

Charles Gerba • professor of virology at the University of Arizona

As for the organisms that actually can get you sick, they have to enter your body through a very specific set of circumstances (mouth, nose, eyes or broken skin) and beat a slew of bodily protections, including our own set of microbes that Tierno says act as "Roman sentries, if you will, in preventing or competing with germs that may come onto the skin."

Tierno isn't even that concerned about households with young kids who may put their mouths directly onto the floor. "Children need to be exposed to a variety of organisms," he says. "The bulk of

organisms we know are not pathogenic, and they go to help our immune response ... You don't want to live in a bubble."

Tierno, unsurprisingly, does not live in a shoes-off household.

Another reason to keep your shoes on has nothing to do with germs. Going barefoot for extended periods can lead to strain on your feet, particularly when walking and standing on hardwood floors. Like many podiatrists, Priya Parthasarathy, a board-certified podiatrist in Silver Spring, Md., has seen an increase in patients with foot problems since the

pandemic. With more people spending their days barefoot working from home, she says conditions such as plantar fasciitis and an inflammation of the ball of the foot called metatarsalgia have become more common.

"Barefoot walking doesn't just affect your feet," says Parthasarathy. "It can also migrate upward, causing pain in the knees and the hips and the back."

The case for taking your shoes off

Did we mention the fecal matter? Even if it doesn't ultimately get you sick, the idea of tracking you-know-what — from who-knows-what — into your home can be rather unsettling.

Charles Gerba, a professor of virology at the University of Arizona, discovered a grab bag of fecal matter when he conducted a study that entailed swabbing the bottom of 26 shoes. He found E. coli on more than a quarter of them and some kind of fecal bacteria on almost all. That bacteria transferred from the shoes to otherwise uncontaminated floor tiles more than nine out of 10 times, the study subsequently found.

"I used to lay on the floor and watch TV, but I don't do it anymore after we did the shoe study," says Gerba.

While the study was not peer reviewed and was financed by a company that

sells machine-washable shoes, it captures an intuitive truth: Our soles pick up the grime we step in all day, and stamp it all over our homes.

And the impact of wearing shoes isn't limited to your floors — it's also apparent in your home's dust, according to Gabriel Filippelli, executive director of the Indiana University Environmental Resilience Institute. Filippelli focuses much of his research on the indoor environment. He is a lead investigator in an ongoing study that scrutinizes the dust in homes, using vacuum dust people submit for analysis.

Here's a sampling of the contaminants that Filippelli's study found: Lead and other heavy metals that came from soil; microscopic balls of cancer-causing, combustible material determined to be from a car's tailpipe or a fire; and lawn chemicals. Filippelli describes the materials as "potentially dangerous for your health, but also just simply gross," and calls the results his "wake-up call" to stop wearing shoes inside: "I got slippers."

He acknowledges that shoes aren't the only way for these contaminants to hitch a ride indoors. Dogs could track them in, as could strollers. But he says removing shoes is a logical, easy way to reduce the risk. It would be much harder to scrub down your dog's paws every time he came

back from a walk, for example. And unlike strollers, which tend to get parked by the door, you'll end up stomping all over the place with your shoes. "The net impact of stuff on your shoes is worse," he says.

It's not just about the health of your body, either. It's also about the durability of your flooring. "Seventy-nine percent of the soil found in carpet is tracked in soil," says Jack White, director of Canadian operations at Rainbow Restoration, which performs specialty floor cleaning and restoration. That soil builds up in the backing of the carpet and, over a period of time, "works as sandpaper and abrades the yarns of the fibers, so it wears it out faster."

Shoes can also damage hardwood, vinyl, ceramic and other hard surfaces, especially when their wearer has a pebble stuck in the tread that winds up scraping the floors.

The verdict: Wear supportive slippers or indoor-only shoes

Between the fecal matter and potentially carcinogenic dust, the arguments for taking your shoes off are too compelling to ignore. Even Parthasarathy, the podiatrist, does not wear her shoes indoors. Instead, she staves off potential foot problems by donning slippers or house shoes that offer arch support, traction and structure.

She recommends Hoka Recovery Slides, Oofos and Vionic house shoes. One important rule: If you can fold the slipper in half, like a flip-flop, it's not going to give you the support you need. Parthasarathy also suggests anti-fatigue floor mats for areas where you stand a lot, like by your kitchen sink.

But what about your visitors? It's one thing to take your own shoes off. Asking guests to do the same can feel awkward or even rude. In fact, the same CBS News/YouGov poll that found most Americans remove their shoes inside also found that more than three-quarters of us don't require guests to do the same.

Jules Martinez Hirst, etiquette expert and founder of Etiquette Consulting, Inc., recommends giving visitors ample advanced notice that your household is shoes-free. As a host, you want your guests to feel comfortable and you don't want to catch them unprepared. If they know ahead of time that they'll have to remove their shoes, they can be sure their socks or feet are ready to bare to the world. To be even more accommodating, Hirst says you can leave a bin of fresh socks or disposable slippers by the door.

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