

New Occupational Hazard Threatens Unshod Office Workers

Whistleblowers alert state health agencies to possible foot fungus scourge in laid-back Vermont, Silicon Valley workplaces.

by Bobbie Socks

Nonconformist, bohemian businesses in Vermont share a long-held footwear philosophy: “no shoes, yes service.”

And similarly, but also really differently, shoelessness has found a foothold among companies in southern California’s famously informal—even wacky—tech start-up scene.

“I love to scrunch the course carpet nodules between my toes while I’m Zooming,” says Greyson Clawtrotters, a programmer at tech unicorn Discalceate in Sunnyvale. “It brings me right back to my middle-school nights on AIM.”

“For me, it’s about resistance,” recalled Paddy Wilder, a consultant at SustainableEdifice in Prattleboro, Vermont. “I’ve been turned away from restaurants and stores more times than I can remember because of my long hair, bellbottoms, and bare feet. They used to claim wearing shoes was a mandate from the board of health. But that was complete and utter bull.”

Until now, that is. Well, maybe; we’ll see.

1960s shoe-wearing regulations may have been fabricated by the conservative establishment, but new evidence suggests that going barefoot at work may not be as harmless and free-spirited as we once thought.

Last year, both the California Division of Health and Safety (Cal/OSHA) and the Vermont Occupational Safety and Health

Wear birks and socks to protect yourself and others



Tinea pedis carrier

Healthy-footed person



Administration (VOSHA) received whistleblower complaints from shod and concerned carpet walkers, alerting the agencies to dangerous surges of tinea pedis—commonly called athlete’s foot, and uncommonly called ringworm of the feet—among laid back colleagues in their respective states.

Blithe O’Boyle, an unpaid intern at the

Image: Arvin Dan Laitinen; courtesy SustainableEdifice, Inc.

In light of recent athlete’s foot outbreaks, Vermont offices like SustainableEdifice are rethinking their “no shoes, yes service” policies.

San Jose healthcare startup PhalanGEN, shared her feelings in an email to BuildingGreen. “I took this position because of PhalanGEN’s awesome perks and amazing culture, which make up for the fact that I’m working my life away for free. But if I have to start wearing shoes at the office, that calculus is really going to change for me.”

“In my opinion,” said Wilder, “these whistleblowers are being unnecessarily squeamish. They can wear shoes and avert their eyes from my feet at any time.”

But not everyone is so serene. Just take, for instance, last November’s uproar over a video of Independent presidential candidate Robert F. Kennedy Jr.’s barefoot jaunt down an airplane aisle to the bathroom. “This is the most disturbing video I have ever seen of a Kennedy,” exclaimed Leslie Jones on an episode of *The Daily Show* covering the incident.

Suffice it to say, the general public is thoroughly sickened by phalangeal displays.

In the wake of the Vermont whistleblower complaint, VOSHA conducted a year-long investigation into the prevalence and risk of ringworm foot in groovier-than-average offices, finding workers in this subset to be 3,000% more likely than their squarer counterparts to contract the infection.

But why the sudden spike? And how did athlete’s foot make the leap from swampy locker rooms to stuffy office spaces?

“Unconventional Americans have been airing their tootsies at work for a long time without any obvious negative health repercussions,” a VOSHA spokesperson announced at a press conference. “As such, it’s important to look past the sole issue of clammy feet and think about what other variables may be lurking.”

In its report, VOSHA suggested that the

risk of ringworm foot increases exponentially for barefoot occupants of:

- Buildings that are certified under the Living Building Challenge’s new eighth petal, Terraphilia. Among other things, its imperatives require owners to install “green” or vegetated floors and occupants to walk barefoot through them a minimum of one hour per day between meetings and at lunch.
- WELL-certified buildings that have achieved the Tactile Comfort feature (which awards points for covering surfaces with materials that are satisfying to pat, brush up against, or walk barefoot on) by installing tiles of various amazing textures in moist environments like bathrooms and kitchens.
- Buildings with old, nonexistent, or non-functional HVAC systems that are either too humid or so dry inside that employees keep personal humidifiers at their desks.

In light of all this, VOSHA issued the world’s first-ever guidance on occupational athlete’s foot (OAF) prevention earlier this month, commenting that indoor humidity is “such a lurker.” The guidance is meant to warn and educate both employers and employees about the fungal hazards of ditching shoes in humid environments. However, in heartening news for Vermonsters, the agency believes that Birkenstocks-and-socks may offer sufficient protection against tinea pedis transmission while still satisfying the aforementioned green building credits. But further research is required.

Cal/OSHA is also expected to release its findings and decision later this year.

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