

Female Factor

Insole makers are targeting women with products made just for their particular needs. << By Jocelyn Anderson

For women looking for better comfort and alignment from their insoles, the latest female-specific inserts are a welcome development. While insoles for women aren't new, they are experiencing a surge in popularity, as more women discover they can find products made with the unique characteristics of their feet — and bodies — in mind.

Though each company's approach is a bit different, Superfeet, Spenco and Sof Sole have all released women's lines in the last two years, distributing to footwear stores, specialty shops, independent pharmacies and department stores. Some mass-market insole makers also offer lines for women. Dr. Scholl's For Her debuted in 2005, and has added new offerings each year.

"I don't want to say unisex doesn't work, but this works better," said Ward Collins, product manager at Ferndale, Wash.-based Superfeet. "And it makes sense that women should have their own products."

Superfeet had already offered an insole for high heels for about four years when it came out with the flat Berry for women in 2006. Sold in bright pink packaging, the Berry insole features a shorter length and narrower heel than its male counterpart, the Orange insole. Although both are made to balance the weight — preventing pronation and supination — the Berry now outsells the Orange. As a result, this year Superfeet came out with the model, aimed at women and snowboarders.

Also in 2006, Washington-based Spenco introduced its Q Factor technology, which is now used in the products in the Spenco For Her line (also packaged in feminine colors). It is based on the idea that women have a greater angle between the thighbone and pelvis than men, so insoles are biomechanically designed to correct the poor alignment caused by such an angle.

With an insole that fits better, consumers benefit in multiple ways, said Ryan Cruthirds, sales director at



▲: Female runners are part of growing demand for gender-specific insoles.

▲: Women's insoles by Sof Superfeet and Spenco.

"You get to extend the life of the shoe, and make it more comfortable," said Collins, who added that the company's products with Q Factor technology are drawing board as the company's gender-specific business continues to grow.

The women's business at Sof Sole, a division of Morrisville, N.C.-based Implus, has seen 20 percent growth since it launched in 2007. Now accounting for 35 percent to 40 percent of the business, Sof Sole's insoles

for women are built on a narrower last for a narrower foot profile. Concentrated cushioning is also located at the highest points of impact, such as the heel.

Kurt Wineman, VP of sales at Sof Sole, said the company's women's insoles are selling at a higher rate than the men's and that plans are in the works to expand the offering. "The research clearly showed that women wanted gender-specific products," said Wineman. "It was a no-brainer from our perspective."

That hasn't always been the case. Lori Shannon opened women's athletic store See Jane Run in San Francisco in 2000 because she noticed a void when it came to products for female runners. She has since seen women become target consumers for many more athletic companies, leading her to open two more locations in Oakland, Calif., and Boise, Idaho.

Gender-specific insoles are one example of how components companies are going after the lucrative women's business. "It's refreshing that they're not treating women like a trend and they're actually seeing the potential here for a whole market that's opened up," Shannon said.

"More women have been entering the running market," agreed Luke Rowe, VP of business development for specialty running chain Fleet Feet Sports. According to Rowe, while unisex insoles still sold best at Fleet Feet in 2007, the women's products accounted for more than double those made for men.

But runners aren't the only ones who buy insoles, retailers said. The average female customer varies both in age and activity level.

On top of that, some noted that the increased need for insoles has stemmed from the large number of people wearing cheaply made shoes or footwear that is too small and a lack of preventative care for the feet. Such issues can cause foot conditions such as tendonitis and acute back pain.

"It's an issue of individual differences with the consumer," said Walt Cleary, president of 9th Street Active Feet in Durham, N.C. "Because we have such a high referral rate from the medical profession, having options and a more specialized approach makes us that much better as a retailer."