

Sole-Searching: How to find shoes that fit your needs **AND** your personality

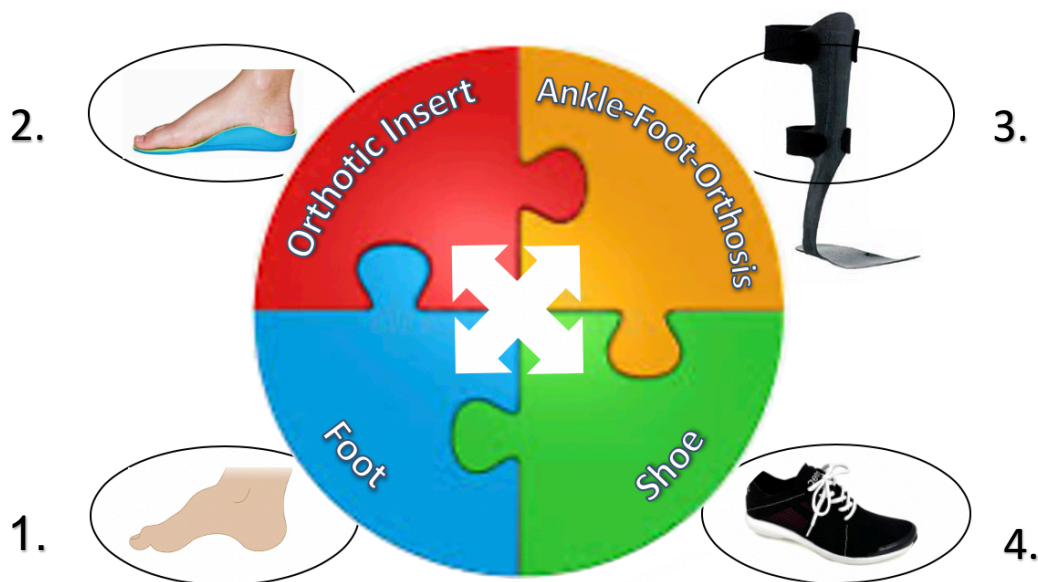
Did you know that shoes can be used to guess someone's traits or characteristics? A 2012 [study](#) showed that **90 percent** of a person's personality is reflected in their choice of footwear.

For those of us needing ankle-foot-orthoses (AFOs) and restricted to wearing shoes that will accommodate our devices, what do *our shoes* say about *our personalities*?

Are our personalities now altered by our diagnoses... and is this now being reflected in our shoes?

Of course not! We are not *defined* by our injuries or conditions even though we may feel *confined* by them at times. This is why one of the most common complaints from AFO-wearers is not being able to wear the shoes of our choice; we want the same style options as everyone else.

The good news is that there are more stylish, orthotic-friendly shoes and boots available today than ever before. The key to finding your perfect shoe is to first understand how footwear is an integral piece in a 4-part puzzle:



Each of the above components are totally interdependent, with the first piece representing your **Foot** and its unique characteristics. For CMT'ers, these "unique characteristics" may include high arches, toe curl, ankle instability and foot drop.

In order to address these issues, and to restore proper alignment and gait, the next 2 pieces of the puzzle—the **Orthotic Insert** and the **AFO**—are critical. When properly designed and paired, customized Inserts and AFOs can offer many long-term benefits: pain alleviation, fall-prevention, better ankle stability, improved proprioception and balance, higher energy levels, decreased rates of muscle atrophy, increased confidence and better overall quality of life.

However, even the *perfect Insert-AFO combination* is incomplete without the fourth and final piece—the **shoe**. The characteristics and design of your shoe will determine what benefits you're likely to receive from your orthotic devices. As such, the same care should be taken when selecting and customizing your footwear because only when this 4-part integrated system is fully optimized will you achieve the maximum benefit from your orthotics.

For AFO-wearers it's true that the shoe must first and foremost meet your orthotic needs, but this does not have to mean sacrificing style. Orthotic-friendly shoes can also reflect your individual flair and panache if you know **what to look for** and **where**. While you may not be able to wear stiletto heels or flip flops with your AFO, there are countless fashionable styles that are indeed AFO-friendly, with many companies now offering large selections of "adaptive and attractive" footwear. Below are key features to look for **before** choosing your favorite style:

- Removeable Insole – allows for proper positioning of AFO and use of custom inserts
- Roomy Toe-box – allows room for AFO and toe crest pads or spacers for those with toe curl
- Firm heel, adequate heel-height – allows for optimal function of AFO, increases stability
- Extra-depth – allows room for AFO and arch supports or metatarsal pads to alleviate pain
- Fully extended zippers – especially in boots, these allow for easy insertion/removal of AFO
- Laces or buckles – provide more secure closures than Velcro to keep AFO in place
- Stable, Rocker-bottoms – footwear with slightly elevated heel and a *mostly flat sole* that curves up near the toe, facilitates forward motion and proper gait mechanics

Today it's easy to find high-end retailers offering selections of adaptive shoes and boots, but the odds of finding your perfect pair are made better by opening your search to include:

- Online retailers like **Zappos** and **ShoeStores.Com** who offer free return shipping if you are unsure if a shoe will work with your AFO
- Adaptive Footwear sellers who specialize in corrective footwear like **Orthotic Shop**, **Flow Feet** and **The Healthy Feet Store**
- Mainstream retailers like **Nordstrom**, **Birkenstock®**, **L.L. Bean** and many more who offer odd-sized pairing for little or no extra cost and easy-returns policies
- Certified Pedorthist facilities, or "footwear pharmacies", who offer custom-crafting services along with specialty shoe selections

In addition to searching online and retail outlets, it can be helpful to look for brands that are known for their stylish, adaptive lines of shoes and boots, such as: **Aetrex®**, **BeutiFeel®**, **Drew®**, **Ecco®**, **TheNorthFace®**, **Propet®**, **Rockport®**, **Waldlaufer®**, **Wolky®**.

The bottom line is that needing to wear an AFO should not limit how we present ourselves to the world. ***Our choice of shoe should speak more about our personalities than our disabilities.***

About the author: Beth Deloria has been an AFO wearer since 2004 and currently leads AllardUSA's [TeamUP](#) movement.

Disclaimer: The vendors and brands mentioned here have been gathered by the author via input from hundreds of actual brace-wearers who were never compensated for their endorsement.