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# Airports are trying to save your soles

## 'Footies' help folks toe line on security

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Responding to the latest airport security rule, the Chicago Department of Aviation on Wednesday moved to protect passengers' most well-traveled items: their feet.

Disposable foot covers appeared Wednesday outside security checkpoints at both Chicago airports. New Transportation Security Administration rules issued earlier this week require all travelers passing through security to remove their footwear--an upgrade from the weeks after Sept. 11, 2001, when the agency had strongly suggested removing shoes for the screening belt but hadn't required it.

A number of the sockless and sandal-clad who arrived at the airport Wednesday to tiptoe through the metal detector couldn't have been more pleased.

"When you spend as much money as we do on pedicures, you need to protect your feet," said Roula Manis, 40, grabbing a pair of "footies" at the United Airlines gate. "A fungus is not something you want to get. And I am not too comfortable with walking on that floor."

The aqua-colored, canoe-shaped foot coverings--commonly called footies or booties--may not be the entire solution to fighting foot fungi, but they're a solid start, doctors said.

"Viruses can penetrate those coverings, but it sure beats going barefoot" said Micheal Flood, a Chicago podiatrist. "You can most definitely catch things off that floor. A virus, plantar warts, athlete's foot."

Flood said the skin on feet sheds constantly, and so too does any virus or fungal infection on that skin. And when a person has abrasions, cracks or an opening in the skin, the likelihood for foot infection is multiplied, Flood said.

The Chicago-based company that makes the booties, Howard Medical Co., also sells syringes and incontinence supplies.

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"The footies are a polypropylene material. It's soft and it's got a bit of gripping tread on the bottom," said company president Ross Litton. "They are worn by doctors in the operating room. Sometimes people wear them in houses when they are painting or cleaning."

Litton said the city contacted him Monday about his supply of footies. "We don't have a contract per se," he said, "but they bought a bunch."

Wendy Abrams, spokeswoman for the Chicago Department of Aviation, said two airport concession groups, HMS Host and Hudson Group, bought about 30,000 pairs of footies. In turn, the companies' logos appear on the bins that hold the footies.

"We recognize that this batch is likely not to last," Abrams said. "But we are monitoring the supply very closely. Should we find we are running low on foot coverings, we have the ability to procure another supply and have them available within 24 hours."

Abrams said airports in Washington, D.C., and Little Rock, Ark., have been passing out footies for passengers since last year. She said her agency hopes to provide the free booties for as long as travelers are required to remove their shoes.

The agency is looking into sponsorships or selling ads on the footies, she said.

At the airport Wednesday, most travelers were more concerned with finding their gate than covering their feet. Many people walked right past the clear cube case of footies, which sat on a stand about waist-high.

Claudia Phalen, 45, of Hammond said the thought of just a couple of steps on the bare floor had her sufficiently freaked out.

"I think this is a great idea," she said while slipping off a pair of strap-heavy pumps with a slight heel. "And as far as vanity goes, I'm not worried about it. I probably look more stupid with them on. At least I'll be clean."

Michael Pink, 51, of Evanston, who travels more than a dozen times a year, said he has been using his own personal baggie booties he created for himself.

"It absolutely grossed me out the first time I had to walk here in my socks," he said. "It's filthy around here."

In his pocket he carried a sandwich bag that contains two rubber bands and two larger clear plastic bags. He uses those materials to fashion his own plastic booties.

He also carries a separate plastic bag for his suit jacket. That way, his jacket won't touch the bottom of any security bin that has held others' shoes. Simply put, he doesn't like germs.

Pink planned to use the free foot coverings Wednesday instead of his own bagged booties. But even if footies become a permanent airport fixture, he said he'll continue to bring his bags.

"What if they run out?" he asked.

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