

2026-6-14
GTK

STYLEADVICE

Are we all supposed to wear socks with sandals now?



Sandals and ankle socks advertise an otherwise unidentifiable English tourist in Florence, Italy. GETTY IMAGES

BY VANESSA FRIEDMAN

THE NEW YORK TIMES

Q: I am a high school teacher, and occasionally I wear sandals. Students have started to tell me I shouldn't have my toes out, but I am of the generation where you don't wear socks with sandals. Is that changing, and if so, why? What are the "rules" of socks and sandals for 2026? — Elizabeth, Overland Park, Kansas

A: You have ... well, stumbled onto a pretty complicated topic. Socks and sandals are like the Romeo and Juliet of fashion: forever being torn asunder, only to find their way back together. But while their mutual attraction makes practical sense — the combo prevents blisters and is simply more comfortable — it is also deeply reliant on social and cultural context, which changes over time. And, as you have discovered, from generation to generation.

The issue is not merely about a fashion combination. It is also about our fraught relationship with feet, which have always been a controversial body part. Sometimes regarded as obscene, sometimes offensive, often a

symbol of class and social status, they are even occasionally the subject of legislation.

Once upon a time, back in the days of the Roman Empire, centurions wore socks, or at least the historical equivalent — “udones,” as they were called — with their gladiator lace-ups as a way to protect their feet and keep them warm. In 15th-century Japan, it was common to wear split-toe tabi socks with footwear.

By the end of the last century, however, wearing socks with sandals had become a national stereotype. Germans, at that time famously seen as among the less fashionable people in Europe, were fond of wearing their Birkenstocks, which had not yet become so out they were actually in, with socks when they traveled — and they traveled a lot. Thus rendering the combination a “don’t” for pretty much everyone else.

Though that cliché ultimately became a historical artifact, it gave way to another: the teen titan of tech in slides and crew socks. This became such a common sight in Silicon Valley that Kevin Systrom, the founder of Instagram, once told The Wall Street Journal that it was the clothing he would ban from his employees’ wardrobes if he could.

At that point, socks and sandals were fully associated with nerd-dom, meaning that soon it was time for fashion, which loves an ironic twist, to embrace the twosome again. And so it did, with multiple brands, including Fendi, Miu Miu and Dior Men all showing sandals and socks on recent runways. (And because trends move so fast these days, other houses, such as Celine and Chanel, are already moving in the bare toes direction.)

That this has happened at the same time that Gen Z has become increasingly vocal about its general discomfort with visible toes — the subject of multiple “who let the dogs out” memes and Reddit threads — is probably not a coincidence. (Gen Z, after all, is the consumer group most brands are most eager to attract.) Whether that reaction is due, as some have posited, to a fear of fetishization — there are accounts on OnlyFans devoted solely to feet — or some other generational quirk, it’s a real thing.

Which means you are now facing the classic question of how to balance your own taste, pedicure budget and deeply embedded associations with those of the people around you. Which is to say: Ask yourself how much you want to engage in the fashion version of the social contract.

If the goal is to keep your audience focused on what you say, as opposed to your feet, this may be an instance in which popular opinion takes precedence. But that doesn’t mean you have to sacrifice your own sense of self to wear socks with sandals with aplomb.

Indeed, according to Bailey Moon, a stylist who works with clients like actors Rebecca Hall and Morgan Spector and who likes to wear his own black slides with black socks, “Socks can actually become a styling tool.”

Wearing tone-on-tone socks with sandals can create a more streamlined silhouette, he said, while some of the fancier socks now available (sheer, fine knits, metallic, patterned) “can make the look feel more put together, rather than jarring.” Especially if the sandals are platforms or even heels, rather than Birks. Check out Bombas, Sock Candy and Tabio for examples. And then think of it as an experiment. You never know what you might learn.