

32.4 Locating Global Sneaker Materials

Look at the soles of your sneakers. They're made of rubber. But sneakers are made of many other materials, too. Some of these materials are found in only a few places in the world. All of the materials come together at factories to create a shoe with three main parts: the upper, the midsole, and the outer sole.

The Complex Upper: Mesh Fabric, Leather, and More The upper is the top part of a sneaker. Some uppers are made of natural materials, such as cotton or leather. The leather comes from the hides of cattle that are raised in Texas, Venezuela, and other livestock centers. The cowhides are usually shipped to South Korea, where they are made ready for use in manufacturing.

Other uppers are made of synthetic, or human-made, materials such as nylon. Nylon fabric is light and dries easily.

The Squishy Midsole: Foam Padding and Air Bags The midsole is the part of the shoe that cushions the bottom of your foot. It is made of plastic and foam padding, which are materials that are produced from oil found in Saudi Arabia and other oil-rich countries.

The foam used in many sneakers may be produced in South Korean factories. Chemicals are poured into molds and then baked. In the process, these chemicals form millions of tiny gas bubbles that give the foam a cushiony feel. Some midsoles also contain small "air bags" filled with pressurized gas.

The Tough Outer Sole: Synthetic and Natural Rubber Treads The tread, or sole, of a sneaker needs to be tough but also flexible enough to put a spring in your step. All types of sneakers used to be manufactured with natural rubber soles. The rubber came from the sap of rubber trees that are grown in such tropical countries as Brazil, Indonesia, Thailand, and Malaysia. Today most soles are formed from synthetic rubber, which is made from coal and oil. Much of the synthetic rubber used in sneaker production comes from factories on the island of Taiwan.



Global Sources

The materials used to make sneakers come from countries around the world. This map shows some of the sources of those materials. Some places supply raw materials, such as leather and oil. Others supply manufactured parts, like nylon and foam padding.

Inside the Sneaker

The three main parts of a sneaker are the upper, the midsole, and the tread. Many of the materials in each part are synthetic. They are made from oil and coal.

