

Beauty

Fashion News: Foot Health vs. Fashion



If you've enjoyed being both comfy and chic in clunky clogs and square-toed loafers, you might cringe to see what women on Fifth Avenue are wearing these days: pumps with needle-sharp toes and toothpick heels.

High fashion and health sense merged briefly in the late '90s. Dress-down corporate culture and shoes designed to look smart and feel great gave professional women unprecedented foot freedom. Now there are signs of a backlash brewing. Designers like Calvin Klein, Dolce & Gabbana, and Oscar de la Renta have brought out lines of women's shoes that might accessorize well with a whalebone corset.

"It is a little upsetting," says Jane Andersen, a podiatrist in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, who serves on the board of the American Association of Women Podiatrists. "I'm definitely very focused on shoes" when treating foot problems, she says.

The wrong shoes, and that means pointy high-heeled shoes primarily, can cause you all kinds of misery. For starters, they can give you painful corns, blisters, and calluses. It gets worse from there.

Andersen says that if you wear high heels all the time and then put on flats, you can get Achilles tendonitis -- a painful inflammation of the Achilles tendon. Wearing high heels can also cause a deformity called "pump bump" -- a bony protrusion on the back of the heel.

Pain caused by high heels doesn't always stay in the feet, either. "Wearing high heels changes the mechanics of how you're walking," Andersen says. The unnatural way you're forced to walk in them can cause knee and back pain.

Hammertoes (claw-like curling of the toes) and bunions (painful swelling on the first joint of the big toe) can be brought on by wearing shoes that are too pointy. People who have bunions and hammertoes are genetically predisposed to getting them, but stuffing their feet into pointy shoes can bring on the problems sooner.

Andersen says that when shopping for shoes, the most important thing to look at is the shape of the toe box -- the rounder the better. She recommends tracing your foot on a piece of paper. If you set a shoe on the tracing and it fits inside the outline of your toes, you're going to have problems wearing it.

It's also important to have your feet measured before you buy shoes. Over time, your feet get bigger. That's not because the bones keep growing -- they don't -- but because the soft tissue relaxes and spreads out. Also, hormonal changes during pregnancy will make your feet bigger afterwards, Andersen says.

Despite the pain and deformities that non-ergonomic footwear can cause, and the surgery that may be needed to fix these problems, many women will always put the demands of fashion first. That's fine if you're healthy in general, but if you have diabetes or another medical condition that causes poor circulation, you must put foot health first -- otherwise you may end up an amputee, and missing a foot has yet to come into vogue.

--Martin F. Downs

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