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Scratching an inch

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By Elizabeth Bromstein

Go easy on high heels now and you'll get more mileage later

Feminist icon Germaine Greer, in discussing the female fascination with high heels, opined recently that psychoanalysts who describe women's psychology as a perpetual struggle between narcissism and masochism might have a point.

Hmm.

I'm a big fan of heels myself. Every inch feels like it adds just a bit of self-confidence.

But I have to say my knees and back might not be what they could have been had I not spent the better part of my 20s as an exotic dancer (ahem) in the requisite 5-inch spikes.

Despite the discomfort, women insist on wearing uncomfortable footwear (though Manolo Blahnik and Jimmy Choo reportedly make way comfier versions, if you can afford them, which I can't).

What the experts say

"Over 10 years ago I demonstrated a link between high-heeled shoes and knee arthritis. Knee arthritis causes more disability with respect to mobility than any other single disease in the elderly. A wider heel doesn't seem to make a difference. As my research has evolved, I've found that a number of other features in footwear are also detrimental to the knee, particularly those in your over-engineered athletic shoe. Science has historically played a very small role in determining what people wear on their feet."

CASEY KERRIGAN, MD, chair, department of physical medicine and rehabilitation, University of Virginia, Charlottesville

"The stiletto heel is a fetish object. The elevated foot makes your calf more tense. It forces your hips slightly out, and to keep your balance, your steps have to be slightly inwards, which requires a movement of the hips that accentuates a woman's bottom. It's not very healthy – people will suffer lower leg and back damage – but women will do all sorts of things for style."

STEPHEN JUAN, anthropologist, University of Sydney, Australia

"I don't think a high-heeled shoe worn in a reasonable way, if you're conscientious, is going to be a problem. But if you wear it 12 hours a day despite suffering, then it is. The conundrum for us as orthopaedic surgeons occurs when someone comes to us and says,

'I don't have any pain, but I can't wear my Jimmy Choo spikes.' Patients will ask us to correct a bunion or hammertoe to fit into a high-heeled shoe. They will ask to have a toe shortened. There have been reports of patients having their toes amputated, and of women getting silicone injections into the fat pad of the foot. I don't think it's good medicine to do an operation on somebody just to help her fit into a fashionable

high heel.”

DONALD R. BOHAY, MD, professor, Michigan State University, spokesperson, American Orthopedic Foot & Ankle Society, Grand Rapids

“We used pictures of a man and a woman with average leg lengths. Then we altered the pictures to increase and decrease leg length, keeping the height the same, by 5, 10 and 15 per cent in each direction. We found that people considered the leg length that was 5 per cent longer than average most attractive. Legs can convey a biological signal about health and good genes. People with very long or short legs are seen as not of the best biological quality. John Wayne was very tall, but still he wore high heels.”

BOGUSLAW PAWLOWSKI, professor, department of anthropology, University of Wroclaw, Poland

“For some people, depending on the structure of their feet, wedge sandals, for example, might be okay in the 3-to-4-inch range. But for daily use I would not suggest that anyone wear shoes over 2 inches or you’re going to suffer the consequences by your 40s. These include bunions; forefoot neuroma, which is a painful growth; plantar fasciitis; ankle injuries such as sprains and strains; muscle strain on the calf; different sorts of knee injuries; and hip and back problems.”

LIZA EGBOGAH, chiropractor, Toronto

“High-heeled shoes can tilt the pelvis forward and cause increased lordosis, which pushes your back into extension, strains muscles and irritates nerves. With a normal back, it’s not that bad. But if you have something wrong already, it’s going to further aggravate it. Heels also decrease the amount of base support you have in your feet, so they make you more unstable.”

LEIGH DAVIS, physiotherapist, On the Mark.it Physiotherapy, Toronto