

Putting your Best Foot Forward: Avoiding Footwear Folly

At some point we've all bought uncomfortable shoes hoping we could "break them in" simply because they completed the ideal outfit. For centuries, women have selected footwear on the basis of appearance rather than comfort, so it's not surprising that women experience four times as many foot problems as men. Our feet need all the support they can get especially since they strike the ground an average of eighteen hundred times over a mile long walk and the average person walks five miles each day. So what happens when your boots just aren't made for walking?

Normally, the stresses associated with walking are distributed across the foot's twenty-six major bones. Certain types of footwear, such as high heeled shoes, sandals, and the summer fashion craze, flip-flops, concentrate these stresses on small areas of the feet, which can lead to unsightly calluses, bunions, as well as heel, knee, and back pain. Although it may not be possible to resist all of the trendiest footwear fads, exercising some preventive strategies can help reduce shoe-related problems:

High Heels

Perhaps the most common dress shoe design for women is the high heel or stiletto, which elevates the heel, transferring most of the body's weight onto the balls of the feet. Worse still, high-heeled shoes often have pointed toes, which prevent your tender tootsies from spreading out to provide a sturdy base of support for the body.

The body compensates for all this weight shifting by shortening the calf muscles, flattening the natural curve of the low back, and tilting the pelvis forward. Studies show that wearing high-heeled shoes is a risk factor for developing low back pain and that high heels can aggravate pre-existing back conditions [1]. In addition, recent research indicates that wearing dress shoes with heels of just one and a half inches increases the pressure on the knees by up to twenty percent, which may predispose wearers to developing arthritis of the knees. Interestingly, shoes with wide or "chunky" heels were shown to be just as hard on the knees as their narrow-heeled counterparts [2, 3].

The obvious solution is to avoid the use of high-heeled shoes. If you must wear heels, choose shoes with square rather than pointy toe boxes and bring along a pair of flats to change into whenever possible. Regular stretching of the calf muscles may also reduce the pressure on the heels, ankles, and knees.

Sandals

In the heat of the summer, there's nothing like a pair of sandals to let your feet breathe, but beware of thin-soled designs, which offer little cushioning, as well as flat-soled sandals, with no arch support. It's best to opt for a sturdy pair of sport-styled sandals with wide, adjustable straps, which can be cool yet comfortable.

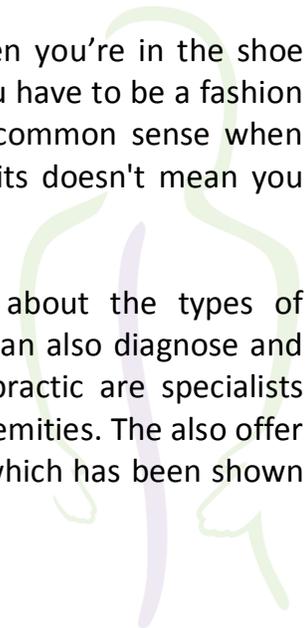
Flip-Flops

Originally designed for use at the pool or beach, and consisting only of a thin sole and strap between the toes, the flip-flop has made it to the mainstream. The flat soles of the typical flip-flop offer your foot little or no support or shock absorption and the backless design forces you to hold the shoe on your foot using your toes. These features place tremendous strain on the joints and soft tissues of the feet and legs, predisposing wearers to conditions ranging from ankle sprains to back pain and foot sores.

If you must have a pair of flip-flops, choose a pair with a thicker sole for more cushioning and avoid wearing flip-flops for extended periods of time or while playing sports.

The best time to avoid future footwear frustration is when you're in the shoe store! Making sensible footwear choices does not mean you have to be a fashion flunky, but simply that you should exercise caution and common sense when choosing your shoes. Remember, just because the shoe fits doesn't mean you should wear it!

Your chiropractor can provide advice and information about the types of footwear that would best suit your particular needs, and can also diagnose and treat many footwear-related problems. Doctors of chiropractic are specialists trained to treat and prevent disorders of the spine and extremities. They also offer gentle, hands-on treatment to the joints and soft tissues, which has been shown to improve mobility and function.



Tips for Shoe Savvy Shoppers

1. Shop for shoes in the afternoon or evening since our feet tend to expand throughout the day.
2. When shoe shopping, wear the thickest socks or stockings you would normally wear with the type of shoe you are buying.
3. Always try on both shoes, since one foot is often a bit larger than the other.
4. If a shoe is uncomfortable when you try it on in the store, don't buy it.
5. Choose shoes whose shape resembles the shape of your feet.
6. When buying sandals, choose a pair with strong soles and arch support.
7. If buying flip-flops, choose a pair with a thick sole for cushioning.
8. Avoid wearing flip-flops for extended periods of time or when playing sports.
9. Stretch the muscles of your legs and calves regularly throughout the day.
10. Have your feet assessed by a chiropractor to determine your specific footwear needs.

References:

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2. Kerrigan DC et al. (2001). Women's Shoes and Knee Osteoarthritis. *The Lancet*, 357(9262): 1097-1098.
3. Kerrigan DC, Johansson JL, Bryan MG, Boxer JA, Crose UD, Riley PO (2005). Moderate-heeled shoes and Knee Joint Torques Relevant to the Development and Progression of Knee Osteoarthritis. *Arch Phys Med Rehabil.* 86(5): 871-875.

