

## **Kick Foot Pain Now!** **Why you're hurting -- and how to get back on your feet**

### **The Belle of the Ball -- With Bunions**

"My feet are a size 10," says Athena Tsembelis, 40. "For a long time, they were 8 1/2, then they started swelling from all the years I've spent trying to stuff them into shoes made for Cinderella. I wanted to be the belle of the ball and wear dainty glass slippers, so I continued to buy shoes that were too narrow, too high and too much money." Tsembelis's choice of shoes cost her more than money: She eventually needed surgery to remove a painful bunion from her left foot. And she may need surgery for her other foot as well.

It's not just Cinderella wannabes whose feet are aching. Men suffer too. Noah Tannen, 33, for example, recalls a painful plantar wart that grew to the size of a quarter. "I'm not sure if it was caused by back-country skiing in rental boots or playing Ultimate Frisbee in wet cleats one cold Seattle winter," he says. But he had to have it frozen and shaved off.

One in six Americans is plagued by foot trouble, caused mostly by ill-fitting shoes, according to the American Orthopaedic Foot & Ankle Society. And overweight men and women put added strain on their feet simply by walking. What's worse, pain that starts with the feet may not end there. "Your feet to your knees to your hips to your back to your neck -- it's all part of the same thing," says Johanna Youner, DPM, a podiatric surgeon who warns that high heels, for instance, can throw the spine out of alignment. She adds that flip-flops or flat shoes that don't offer arch support can cause knee pain, because "your knees will sag inward, your hips will be problematic and other parts of your body will not be in great alignment." And that can lead to even more serious orthopedic problems later on.

So how you treat your feet can mean the difference between tripping the light fantastic and chronic conditions that require more than an over-the-counter remedy.

### **In Style, Out of Step**

Some people care more about how a shoe makes them look than how it makes their body feel. In fact, 42 percent of women say they'd wear shoes that are uncomfortable in order to look more stylish, says an American Podiatric Medical Association study. Even Dr. Youner admits that high heels not only make a woman look taller and thinner, "they stick out your chest, make your butt stick out, they make you look sexier, curvier and slimmer." But, she warns, "the downsides are huge." After all, "it's nice to be able to walk."

Wearing high heels can also cause blisters, corns, bunions and hammertoes, which can be painful as well as unsightly. A few women are even opting for controversial surgeries such as the "toe tuck" to slim the pinkie toe, "toe shortening" to downsize toes, and "toe slimming" to remove fat deposits on the tips of toes and fight so-called toe-besity.

But even those who would never dream of having surgery to improve the look of their feet continue to choose shoes with looks in mind. Sought-after beauties have always been associated with perilous footwear, whether it's the ill-fitting glass slipper that helped Cinderella nab a prince, or the mile-high Manolo Blahnik stilettos that had Carrie teetering around Manhattan in *Sex and the City*. Today's sky-high wedges, espadrilles and platform shoes are just as perilous. While these styles may seem more stable and easy to walk in than stilettos, warns Dr. Youner, "the higher the platform, the farther you fall."

Men are subject to some of the same foot problems from the stiff, tight leather shoes they wear for work. And weekend warriors often pound the ground in athletic shoes designed for walking or cross-training -- not rushing the net or sliding into third. "Men aren't forced into high heels with points in the front -- unless they're cowboys," says Dr. Youner. "So when men have foot trouble, it tends to be plantar fasciitis caused by inadequate support of the arch, sports-related heel pain, or bunions from trauma, like running too much or other weight-bearing exercise."

Many soldiers experience plantar fasciitis too. "It's the most common problem we see," says Lt. Col. Patrick G. Sesto, DPM, a podiatry consultant to the Army surgeon general. The painful condition -- an inflammation of the plantar fascia, a thick band of tissue along the sole of the foot -- can be caused by a genetic predisposition or, in the case of soldiers, by exertion. Says Lieutenant Colonel Sesto, that means "overuse from running, marching and carrying extra weight like a rucksack." So how much damage can a pair of shoes (and other foot abuse) really do? A lot.

### **Prevention: A Step in the Right Direction**

Most experts agree there's no miracle cure for foot problems. Prevention is the key. Buying good-quality, breathable leather shoes is a start. Sweaty feet can cause more than just smelly shoes. Our feet contain a high concentration of the body's sweat glands (3,000 of them per square inch). "If moisture collects in the shoe," warns Robert J. Baglio, DPM, a foot and ankle surgeon in Charlottesville, Virginia, "it could lead to a number of skin issues, including athlete's foot." And wearing synthetic shoes that don't breathe puts you at risk for developing foot funguses.

For women, the right shoe is crucial. Heels that are two inches or less keep your ankle from being much higher than the ball of the foot, a better bet than stilettos or pumps. It's not just heel height that's a concern for women -- the shape of the shoe plays a part too. Round- or square-toed styles are easier on the feet than pointy ones. But regardless of shape, if your shoes are too small and rub against your toes, you run the risk of developing painful bunions, corns and hammer-toes.

Fortunately, some new treatments are emerging. For example, painful corns are now being treated with Restylane injections, an off-label use of the FDA-approved facial line filler. And minor foot discomfort can be eased with the help of orthotic devices: moleskin on blisters, heel cups to alleviate plantar fasciitis, metatarsal pads under the ball of the foot and arch supports in shoes, which are available over the counter or by prescription from a podiatrist or orthopedist. The U.S. Army even issues foot powder and moleskin to soldiers to help them prevent foot funguses and treat blisters.

No doubt foot abuse will continue. "If everyone wore sneakers, I'd lose half my business," jokes Dr. Youner. But since sneakers aren't acceptable, or fun, to wear at all times, she advises that women should limit the amount of time they spend in heels. She also suggests that after wearing heels, you do the "runner's stretch" to lengthen the Achilles tendon, with both hands on a wall and one foot extended behind you.

And if, on occasion, you want to feel like Cinderella at the ball, go ahead. "If you get dressed up and wear an excessively high heel, that's fine," says Dr. Baglio. Just remember that the clock will strike midnight and that, as he says, "we have to care for our feet, and they'll take care of us."

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