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wellness WATCH Amitabh Baxi

Achilles' HEEL



You may need to check whether high heels are right for you

A COLLEAGUE recently narrated an interesting tale about how her doctor had traced high heels as the reason behind her back pain. Now, most of us know that stilettos and style make most women go tip-toe and maintaining equilibrium with élan is more of an art than science for them. But before you shop for that show-stealer pair, do you spare a thought for the hazards of high heels?

Let's understand why your style statement may come at a high price? In fact, doctors feel that the current craze for superhigh heels with very narrow toes create problems for the feet. Round-toes shoes with five or even seven-inch heels, in vogue now, are hardly better. As for the popular thongs—they expose feet and cause frequent accidents. They suggest that the best shoes for healthy feet mimic the foot's natural shape, while offering support to the arch and a flexible sole underneath the toes.

Says Dr. Sanjay Swarup, senior consultant, orthopaedics, Sri Ganga Ram Hospital & Max Healthcare: "There are some major health problems with high heels. First, owing to the position of the feet, the big toe starts deviating outside. This condition is called Hallux Valgus and leads to the formation of bunions—a swelling and redness at the base of the toe." According to Dr. Swarup, the second problem pencil-heels can lead to relates pain in the heels. Since the body weight is transferred to a small surface area, the heels get stiff, causing constant pain in the heels. And third, if you stand or walk for a long time wearing high heels, there are definite chances of getting low back or neck pain or even disc prolapse in a severe case. This happens because a woman wearing high heels tends to bend backwards to maintain the centre of gravity. This long wrong posture maintained for long hours can lead to back pain. Also, high heels can lead to calf muscle and knee joint pains, making the wearer more prone to spraining an ankle. Dr. Swarup adds, "There are other reasons as well. An elevated heel lifts the foot out of its natural position and shortens the Achilles' tendon. Such shoes also pitch the weight of the body forward disproportionately onto the ball of the foot, which in turn upsets the stabilising mechanism of the foot. Besides, fashionable shoes that try to convert the foot into an ideal form, with the toes narrowed or tapered to a point, often require cramming the foot into less space than it would normally occupy. These can impede the foot's mechanical function by limiting toe and ankle flexibility.

Regular tight shoes put pressure on nerves and even damage them, and also contribute in the long run to arthritis, say doctors. In the worst case, they add, tight shoes can also produce foot deformities.

That's said, experts say all this is relative. Women who are strong and exercise regularly often don't have any complications, although they acknowledge that pencil heels, due to their awkward shape, can cause stress to the leg, heels and back muscles.

So what's to be done? At a time when fashion is getting to dizzy heights, it's obvious that sheer health rhetoric won't work. But paying attention to what's best for an individual may go a long way in removing the odd problems. Dr. Swarup advises that women should choose the right shoes for their feet type and their activity. For instance, women with

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PRECARIOUSLY BALANCED

If you stand or walk for a long time wearing high heels, there are definite chances of getting low back or neck pain. This happens because a woman wearing high heels tends to bend backwards to maintain the centre of gravity. If stretched for long hours, this wrong posture can lead to back pain

Owing to the position of the feet when wearing high heels, the big toe starts deviating outside. This leads to the formation of a bunion, which is swelling and redness at the base of the toe

high arches may need more cushioning, and people with relatively flat feet may need more arch support.

So, the next time you jump suddenly from stilettos to flats, or from daily flip-flops to high heels, don't forget that the best way to allow your tissues to adapt is to make no rapid changes. Changes in footwear and training should always be gradual—evolutionary, not revolutionary, say experts.

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