

BRINGING IT DOWN A NOTCH

By Dawn Grosser

Winter is over, thankfully, and spring/summer is here. Time to dust off the sandals and open-toed shoes and let our feet enjoy the breeze. Some of us have shoes that have already seen many a summer, ones well worn in and ready to go, and while others of us prefer only the newest fashion each season and are ready for this year's debut. But for those of us with painful feet, many of the shoes in our closet don't work anymore or only work for very short periods of time. Still, we hang on, hoping desperately that we will be able to wear them again one day.

As a foot and ankle orthopedic surgeon, I see all sizes of feet and all sorts of problems. Most of the time, shoes are both the culprit and the cure for many issues. Day in and day out, I treat women in my practice with painful bunions. Shoes with pointed toe region (called the toe box) usually exert a constant inward pressure on the foot. If this stress continues over any length of time, bunions can form on the great toe (or big toe as it's more often known) and bunionettes (also called a tailor's bunion) can form on the small toe. And these things hurt! Furthermore, the height of the heel can increase the pressure on the toes and in the ball of the foot. The higher the heel, the higher the pressure. The stress of the shoe pushing against the toes can lead to hammer toes, claw toes, and painful callouses. Ouch! The biggest culprit? The stiletto, and all variations thereof.

The stiletto was developed in the post war 1950s by a French designer, Roger Vivier, who clearly did not have to wear them. The word stiletto stems from the Latin "stilus" meaning stake. The heel was made with a steel rod enclosed in a wooden or plastic material. This causes the wearer to walk more on her toes—a position that makes the calves appear more shapely and elongated and emphasizes the buttocks. It also makes the feet appear smaller than they actually are—all of which can be a desirable look [1]. Unfortunately the price we pay is often deformed feet from years of wearing shoes too high and too narrow in the toebox. Heels are Western society's form of foot binding so often criticized in the Chinese culture.

In China, the tradition of foot binding typically began with girls ages 5 to 7, and continued for 2 years binding the heel towards the toes raising the arch to create a lotus leaf appearance of the foot. The ideal foot length was 3 inches. Small feet were desirable and commanded a high bride price. This practice was banned in 1949, just about the time the stiletto in the West was introduced [2].

So, a few words of advice as you gaze into your closet deciding which style of shoe to adorn your feet with today: 1) Choose comfort over fashion for a long day on your feet. 2) Dress from the bottom up, not the top down. 3) Make sure you have your feet measured routinely, as most feet increase in size/length and the size you're choosing may be too small. 4) Get rid of shoes that hurt you to wear and even old tennis shoes you "only mow the lawn in." The cushion and support is gone and you may start developing other problems especially if you can already see wear patterns in the sole of the shoe. 5) Look for roomy toe boxes. You know how your feet look when you're barefooted? Choose shoes that most closely allow this natural spread. 6) Go shopping intentionally to find a pair of shoes that you like but also that feel good. Be willing to spend time and money picking out the next pair of shoes. A good pair of shoes is worth it and may help you avoid painful problems that can be hard to resolve.

I'm here to report that not all "good for you" shoes are ugly. In Dallas, a tried and true shoe store, EG Geller, has been around many years and carries comfort/fashion shoes with a knowledgeable staff to assist. Online shoes at Zappos.com or 6pm.com can also be good, but you have to know a little bit about the styles that are comfortable for your feet. Some brands that I often turn to include Aetrex, Alegria, Aravon, Beautifeel, Dankso, ECCO, Finn Comfort, Fly London, Gentle Souls, Mephisto, Naot, Oofos, Pas de Rouge, Paul Green, Sofft, Thierry Rabotin, Vionic.

1) *Design Museum, Fifty Shoes That Changed the World.*

2) *Jackson Beverley, Splendid Slippers: A thousand years of an erotic tradition*

