

Fashion sense can be hazardous to your health

by R.J. Ignelzi

Being a slave to fashion can be a real pain in the neck. And back. And feet. And skin.

THE WORSE FOR WEAR - A survey by the American Podiatric Association found that about 85 percent of women are willing to sacrifice the health of their feet for fashion. CNS Illustration by Cristina Martinez Byvik. Strutting around in mile-high stilettos, squeezing into second-skin pants or carrying a handbag the size of a Samsonite suiter may make you appear stylish, but the damage these chic pieces do to your body over time ain't pretty.

"When it comes to fashion, people don't care about listening to reason even if it's causing them pain. They just want to look good," says Dr. Neil Tayyab, an orthopedic surgeon at Scripps Memorial Hospital in San Diego.

A survey by the American Podiatric Association found that about 85 percent of women are willing to sacrifice the health of their feet for fashion.

"It's really a lifestyle issue," says Dr. Douglas Chang, an orthopedic surgeon at the University of California San Diego Medical Center. "If you want to go out and feel glamorous for a night, that's OK. But, if you wear some of these things excessively, it can lead to real problems."

Here's a look at some fashions that can be hazardous to your health.

STILETTO HEELS

Killer heels may be the height of fashion, but they're bound to bring you down eventually.

"No doctor will advocate high heels. They affect your biomechanics, the way the bones and joints move, and can control your entire posture," says Dr. Daniel Lee, a podiatrist at UCSD Medical Center.

According to the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons, women who wear high heels have the highest percentage of ingrown toenails, corns, neuromas and calluses. The sexy but sadistic shoes can also exacerbate hammertoes, a condition in which the toes are bent into a clawlike position, and cause or aggravate bunions, misaligned big toe joints that can become swollen and tender.

"Pointed (toe) heels (throw) the body's alignment off and make the foot unstable and wobble from side to side " Lee says. "It's like driving a car with the wheels out of alignment. The entire car starts wobbling. That's your body wearing high heels with pointed toes."

And, it's not just the feet that pay the price. Ankles, legs, knees, hips and backs will also suffer for stilettos.

"Eventually, the women who wear stilettos can't wear anything without a heel because their Achilles (tendons) contract over time," says Dr. Sharon Dreeben, an orthopedic surgeon at Sharp Memorial Hospital.

Tendons and muscles under tension can affect the way the kneecap tracks and cause knee irritation and pain. Studies show that heels higher than 2 1/2 inches can increase the risk of osteoarthritis of the knees and cause you to alter your posture, which strains the back.

"Young women who wear these shoes don't pay the (health) price immediately, but they'll pay in the long term. They'll have problems in their 30s, 40s and 50s," Lee says.

Although many doctors are fans of the new rounded-toe ballet flats, even these sensible-looking shoes can make your feet hurt.

Because the ballet slippers are very flat, they can put a strain on the back, legs and ankles. And, the lack of foot support can cause or exacerbate plantar fasciitis, the inflammation of the plantar fascia, or tissue supporting the arch of the foot.

And, while flip-flops epitomize casual Southern California style, they're not designed to be worn all day, every day.

"Flip flops are biomechanically unstable. There's no heel support and there's weak mid-foot support, so they don't properly support the body weight," Lee says. "Flips-flops force the foot to bend where it shouldn't bend, which can make all the other joints ache and cause arthritis and ligament injury."

GIANT HANDBAGS

Big bags mean big health problems.

"Some of the handbags today are enormous, and if you load them up with things, you can increase the risk of muscular strain in the neck, shoulders and upper back regions," Tayyab says.

If you insist on hoisting around a 20- or 30-pound bag on your shoulder, at least switch shoulders about every 10 minutes to help distribute the weight, he says.

Some doctors compare carrying a giant handbag to participating in an endurance sport and recommend physical training. Dolce & Gabbana deadlifts, maybe? Or Prada presses?

"If you're going to carry around a big, heavy bag, you really need to be in some kind of conditioning program like athletes to be able to withstand that (kind of stress) on your shoulders and spine," says Chang, who adds that you must be "very mindful of using proper mechanics when (lifting it)."

BIG, HEAVY EARRINGS

Large, showy earrings can make a definite fashion statement. But, if they're too heavy, that statement is "ouch!"

"When women with pierced ears wear the big, clunky earrings, the significant weight can make the hole larger or pull through the tissue and cause a tear in the earlobe," says Dr. Susan Stuart, a dermatologist at Scripps Memorial Hospital. "These defects are visible, hard to cover up and very painful."

She cautioned women to stay away from tiny wires holding big dangling earrings, especially around little children who may grab and pull.

Nickel, a common metal found in jewelry, can cause problems for some people who are allergic to it. If nickel makes up any part of the pierced earring or ring, it can cause nickel dermatitis, an itchy, red rash that progresses to tiny blisters and dry patches.

HEAVY NECKLACES

Some of today's fashion necklaces look like a tool belt strung around the neck. It may be interesting, but hardware jewelry is hard to wear.

"If you don't have strong neck muscles, a heavy necklace can pull the neck forward and cause muscle strain in the neck and shoulders and lead to a lot of pain, including headaches," Tayyab says. "Eventually, if you (persist in wearing heavy necklaces), you can develop some degeneration in the neck from the constant pulling on the neck."

If you just can't resist wearing a hardware store around your neck, try strengthening your neck or trapezius muscles through exercises such as upward rows.

THONG UNDERWEAR

To combat the dreaded VPL (visible panty line), many women have thronged to the thong. But not without problems that are a little more serious than a case of VPL.

"Thong underwear comes (in direct contact) with the crease of the buttocks, and for those women who wear very tight-fitting thongs, it can promote bacterial vaginitis and urinary tract infections," says Dr. Shira Varon, a UCSD obstetrician-gynecologist.

Thong panties can also cause chafing and lacerations on the anal area, causing infection.

"Regular cotton underwear, not the thong-style, is the best to prevent yeast infections. Its breathability allows for a healthy flow of air," Varon says.

BODY SHAPERS

Body-shaping underwear (think waist to ankle girdles) help to suck it in and smooth it out, but at what cost?

Shapewear, formerly called foundation garments, that fits too snugly can restrict breathing, digestion and movement.

According to the American Chiropractic Association, clothing that is too tight can be restrictive and throw off your balance. Simple everyday tasks such as bending, sitting and walking become difficult. Restrictions in a person's movements can result in poor posture and misalignment of the spine, the association says.

Very tight clothes lead to an increased retention of heat as well as an increased level of moisture in the vaginal area. That can mean trouble.

"Women who wear (shaperwear) increase their risk of (vaginal and urinary) infections since bacteria like to grow in those kind of warm, moist environments (created by that clothing)," Varon says.

Wearing very tight clothing can also obstruct the sweat ducts and cause a heat rash or something called folliculitis, an inflammation of the hair follicles.

"Constrictive clothing is unhealthy for the skin. Give it a chance to breathe," says Stuart, who recommends against wearing body shapers on a daily basis.

Beth Wood contributed to this article.

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