

# The Weekly PRESS

Philadelphia's Community Newspaper

## Arch Enemy

By Dea Adria Mallin  
Special to the Weekly Press

**T**hey're back! The preferred foot gear of girls in their early Fall dresses in Rittenhouse Square is a very sexy, and precarious, high heel. Over one hundred photographs of 4-inch platforms and 5-inch spike heels on slides, pumps, sandals, and slingbacks appeared in a single recent issue of *Elle* magazine, and Neiman Marcus has dubbed dizzyingly high platforms "the trend you'll wear now and into fall." The call to fashionistas, then, is, "Aim high!"

But is that such a good idea? Some of us remember the last go-round that made girls move like cranes on point, while glam-rockers Elton John and David Bowie took the style to the stage. The fad wore out as one fashion victim after another fell into the arms of the podiatrist and orthopedist.

So why are these killer shoes back? Do young women just want to be stylish? To be taller? To elongate the leg? To be sexy? Ah. There it is. In an age of exaggeration, skyscraper heels may not seem as damaging as bound feet in ancient China and the resulting "lotus gait." But from a psychological standpoint, reaking the bones and folding the feet of baby girls in half and putting them into inflexible wooden shoes—like narrow, pointy shoes that violate the structure of the foot, and like 6-inch stiletto heels—a part of the male fantasy of the ideal woman. She cannot resist the man by running away, and when she is conquered, she will present him with a narrow entryway. Whenever I have shared this with my college students, the young women *gulp*—and then giggle. Apparently, feminism and the sexual revolution were a mere blip on the permanent screen of seduction and erotic fantasies.

Whether symbolic, cultural, political, or ornamental, the shoe speaks to us. But what do the pointy toe and the spike heel—which the shoe industry calls "fun and flirty," suggesting that you "push your pelvis forward and lean back" as you "sashay" and "navigate the shoe"—say to the po-

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as you “sashay” and “navigate the shoe”—say to the podiatrist, who sees the damage?

Ideally, the engineering of a shoe should take into account the anatomical structure of a woman's foot while offering support in the arch, room in the toe box for *all* the toes, and a flexible sole under the toes.

Center City podiatrist Bruce Zappan, D.P.M., board-certified, in practice for over 25 years, and affiliated with Pennsylvania Hospital and HUP, says, “Young women today are not deterred by the pain of fashionable shoes until that pain catches them up short. They will happily buy the glamorous Jimmy Choo, even if it's a half-size too small because it's on sale, and then squeeze into it.” But they pay a price beyond the sale price.

Since the trend appeared, sales data show double-digit growth for high platforms and pointy stilettos, and a concomitant dramatic increase in the number of

young women from 18 to 35 seeking treatment in Dr. Zappan's office.

Narrow, pointy-toed shoes, says Zappan, constrict circulation and put pressure on the many nerves converging in the foot. This may result in shooting pain, pinching, a pins-and-needles sensation, or numbness. It can also lead to corns on the tops of the toes, on the outside of the small toe, and even between the toes. And while 95% of bunions are inherited, narrow shoes generally cause the other 5% of painful bunions.

Squeezing into a pointy shoe can also cause a deformity called hammer toe, in which the toe curls up like a claw and won't release. Constrictive shoes can also cause trauma to the nail, so that podiatrists are seeing lots of ingrown toenails and lots of fungus problems. Even with treatment, a fungus may take months to improve.

As for the high heel, Zappan says that women should be cautious about anything over an inch, and should expect trouble starting at three

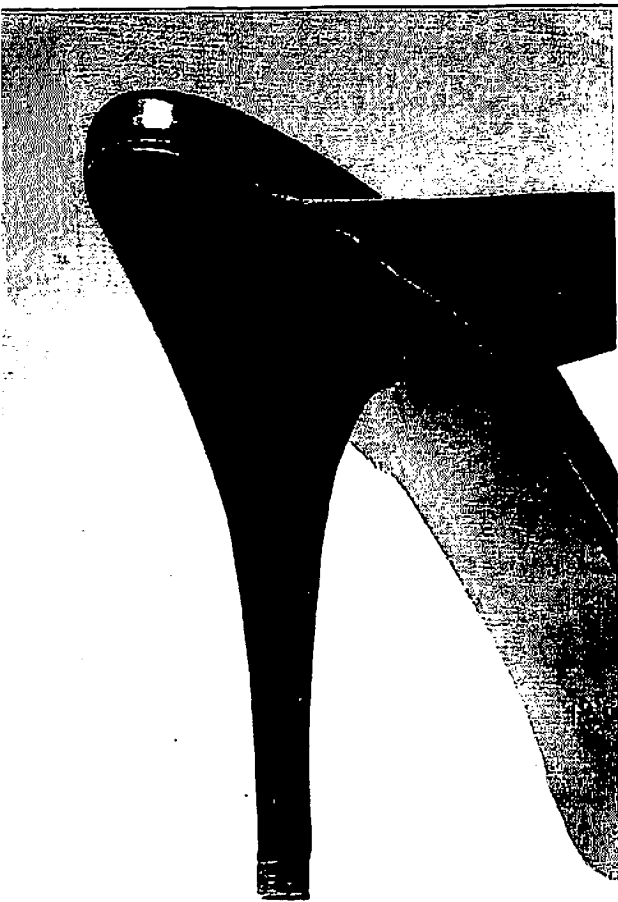
inches.

The high heel obviously lifts the foot out of its natural position for walking, and over time, he says, shortens the heel cord as the Achilles tendon contracts. This creates another kind of trouble when women shift from spikes into flip-flops.

High heels also put strain on the ball of the foot, creating calluses, and affect the lower back and posture, and make the ankle far less stable. If an ankle sprain or break occurs, ligaments can be stretched or torn, sometimes leading to permanent laxity in the ligaments.

How about platforms? Zappan prefers a platform where the heel height disparity is reduced by a very thick sole. Still, a wooden or cork platform does not bend, and the repeated stress of coming down on the arch can lead to foot pain in the arch.

As if all this were not enough, there is Haglund's Deformity, casually called the “pump bump.” It's a bony enlargement on the back of the heel, described as “red, painful, swollen, and boggy.”



caused when the back of the shoe rubs against the back of the heel so that hard calcium deposits eventually form.

Adding insult to injury, stiletto heels that have metal tubing in their structure have been triggering airport security checks!

Is there a solution? Zappan is seeing an esthetic and fashion-consciousness among his patients that just won't let go, as if women, including those who know the dangers, were hard-wired for glamour. "I know female *podiatrists*," he says, "who wear Jimmy Choos!"

While Zappan doesn't expect high-end shoe designers to make beautiful 1-inch or 2-inch heels with rounded toes, he is concerned about women going to extremes for the psychological boost of looking young and sexy and measuring up to fashion dictates. One extreme is having a toe shortening surgical procedure to fit into current styles. Another mimics the stepsisters in *Cinderella* by actually having a toe removed to

accommodate the pointy shoe. (In Italy, designers elongate the pointy shoe so women's toes are never squeezed or disfigured. Returning from a recent summer in Italy with these shoes, I heard comments that my elongated shoe silhouette mixed the good with the bad and the ugly. They said the same thing in the 80s when I came home from the Southwest with cowboy boots from Texas where good boot makers get the look by extending the front point *way* beyond the toes.)

While Dr. Zappan is committed to helping people to take as good care of their feet as their faces, he also suggests that the woman who must have her "high" should go with the Greek philosophy of moderation in all things. Yes, wear the stilettos and the platforms, but save them for Saturday night, and for sitting down to dinner instead of dancing into the wee hours. He

points to a poster on his back wall with historically glamorous shoes that, as he notes, are so beautiful that they belong in a museum. He means that. In a museum. Not on the foot. Zappan also pulls out a very sleek orthotic, relatively new on the market. It fits inside a well-made high heeled pump or a slingback or backless stiletto.

Curiously, even with the spate of foot problems, women tend to look more to the spa than to the foot doctor, more to the pedicure than the cure. (Spas can cause foot problems when improperly and inadequately sterilized implements are used, so bring your own!) As magazines and leading footwear designers lure young women into wearing shoes that are severely pitched, uncomfortable, and dangerous to well-being, a director of the World Travel Market, Fiona Jeffery, hails health and wellness as tourism's fastest-growing sector and points to the "booming health and medical spa to relieve pain and discomfort." Well-being, she adds, "is the bottom line for every consumer," and the spa is "no longer the sole domain of the well-heeled woman with nothing else to do."

Well-heeled women of the world, take note. Spas will happily take your money for the very temporary relief they can provide for back, calf, and foot; podiatrists will prosper as you traipse to their offices for correction and relief from pain; and so will the sympathetic orthopedic surgeons resetting your broken foot or ankle. But what exactly did you gain? At least *ask* the question before you make such a high-risk investment as a fashion foot forward skyscraper heel with pointed toes. And consider that even in a 2-inch heel—or less—the dance of desire will still go on.