



Healing touches for high heels

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High-heels really aren't made for walking, but neither are those cute, red patent-leather ballet flats, either.

Ideally, we'd all be walking around in customized comfort shoes with a modest heel that conforms to our sole shape, supports our arches, compensates for our unique tendencies to roll our feet inward or outward and cushions every stride. All the while, these glorious shoes would be constructed to wrap around our heels, ankles and foot bed to promote stability.

If these shoes weren't typically ugly as sin, we'd buy them.

I prefer heels. The tall, precarious type with a slim, tapered heel are a favorite of mine, even though I know that they are bad for my feet.

I know that they are bad because they often hurt. They make my calves look fabulous, improve my posture and offer me the opportunity to stand over 6 feet tall, but there's a growing layer of thick epidermis on the ball of my foot that says that these shoes are not my friend.

But I will not stop wearing them, so I've learned a few tricks to cope with the occasional discomfort. Dr. Lori Weisenfeld, a podiatrist and clinical adviser for the American Running and Fitness Association, also offered some tips in a recent phone interview.

Weisenfeld said that shoppers have to be smart about shoes, but that doesn't mean that they have to buy ugly shoes. Comfort is individual, so no one can decide how high is too high for heels except you — although the general rule is to stick to a maximum of 2 and 2 1/2 inches of heel if you want to be reasonable. But don't think that the optimum shoe has no heel.

"Ballet flats appear to be sensible, but for most people . . . it's actually not a good shoe to spend a lot of time walking in," Weisenfeld said. She noted that the flat is too flat and lacks arch support. Most people need at least a quarter inch of heel for proper stability and balance, she said.

So ballet flats, flip flops and high heels should be worn in moderation.

A shoe can be pretty and sensible

Of course, sensible is relative. But look for sandals that have a suede look to the sole (you'll find these on higher end and a growing number of low-end shoes). It will give your foot more traction when the humidity index rises. And many, many shoe companies are using more padding in high heels. By the way, the newest lines of the old standard comfort (translation: not cute) shoe companies such as Rockport and Naturalizer are now turning out products stylish enough to make you do a double take on the label.

Choose your platforms wisely

If you still want the height with less effort, a platform is a great option. You'll get a half inch to an inch boost without extra pressure on the ball of your foot. But steer clear of the 3-inch platform for serious walking. The higher the platform, the more unstable and heavy it becomes.

Put your larger foot forward

Weisenfeld says that everyone has a larger foot, and it usually corresponds to your dominant hand. Find yours and use that foot to test new shoes before you buy.

What if the shoe still rubs your foot the wrong way?

For high heels, every woman needs a stock of ball-of-the-foot cushions. Change them every couple of months — more often if your feet perspire a lot. Weisenfeld is a spokeswoman for ProFoot, which offers a clear gel cushion called Toe Beds (\$4.99, profootcare.com). The product also helps align toes to mitigate fatigue and ease corn and callus formation. In this category, Dainty Footings (\$6.95, daintyfootings.com) and Foot Petals (\$6.95, footpetals.com) offer solid cushions that absorb shock, repel moisture and reduce slipping.

Insolia's High Heel Inserts (\$9.99, insolia.com) offer a twist on foot cushions. These clear gel inserts are for the heel. The product looks like a small, flat shoe horn and should be positioned to cup the heel. It helps keep the foot from slipping forward onto the ball of the foot and touts that "the magic is weight shift." The other companies above offer their own heel cushioning products as well.

For itchy, scratchy straps, look in the same part of the store for strap liners (thin foam-like strips that create a buffer between the stiff shoe and your soft skin. Prices range from \$4.95 to \$6.95.).

Among the products that will help keep shoes fresher, drier and easier to balance in, Kiwi Fresh'ins (\$8.99 for six pairs, kiwicare.com) and Summer Soles' Suede Softness animal print inserts (\$7.95, summersoles.com) offer absorbent, bacteria-fighting products.

As general maintenance, the pedicure is key, and so is some kind of exfoliating device. Kerasal has introduced Callus Removal Cleansing Pads (\$5.99 for 10, kerasal.com), self-foaming, dual-textured pads that are disposable for those who aren't fond of the pumice stone.

On a final note, Weisenfeld suggested that everyone pack a little protection in their purse. The Slik Stik (\$4.99, profoot.com) is one of many products that can be applied to help prevent irritation to any spot where the shoe starts rubbing against the foot.