



arch enemies

Fashion's **heel-height** roller-coaster is wrecking **havoc** on our feet. Here, how to wear this season's flats, **without pain**.

FLATS VERSUS HEELS

It was inevitable. The return of the flats. After a long run with stilettos, where were heels to go but down? Yet the current crop of ultra-flats aren't as comfortable or as good for your feet as they look. They can damage your arches. "Wearing flats for extended periods of time can put a tremendous amount of strain on the arch, because these shoes can't absorb the shock of the foot hitting the ground," says Dr Martin Sullivan, a leading Sydney foot and ankle surgeon. "Women who are over 45 are at particularly high risk because of the hormonal changes associated with menopause," he adds. Although most of us are born with resilient muscles, tendons and ligaments in our feet, overuse (from being on our feet all day and from regularly switching our heel height from a pair of Manolo Blahniks to a pair of Birkenstocks without proper stretching) can gradually wear down these elastic tissues, meaning we need even more support from our shoes. And many of the new flats just don't cut it.

GETTING COMFORTABLE

Choosing the right shoe is key. Look for styles that have arches (read: more support and cushioning) built into the inside of the shoe or boot. A moulded bulge on the interior sole is the evidence you require. Birkenstocks and Prada Mary Janes have this support, which is less likely to be found in leather flats or slides. Stretching is also a good preventative. Take a break from your flats and "draw" letters of the alphabet with your bare feet. Or do heel lifts to strengthen the arch: stand on one foot

and rise up and down on your toes 10 times, then do the other foot. Frequent stretch breaks and arch supports, as well as an occasional slip back into your stilettos, can give your feet much needed relief.

REALITY CHECK

After wearing flats for several days, your arch may begin to drop, causing a problem called adult-acquired flat foot syndrome. Symptoms include pain on the inside of the ankle and the bottom of the heel, and eventually leg and back pain. "Once your arch starts to flatten out, the full impact of walking gets transferred to your calves, knees and lower back," says Dr Sullivan, who adds that with every step, more than twice your body weight is absorbed by your lower extremities. In a worst-case scenario, physiotherapy may be required to correct the problems, and foot surgery (with a minimum three-month recovery time) may be necessary. The other rarely discussed – and slightly embarrassing – problem: tripping. It's natural, when you switch to flats, to feel a little uncoordinated at first. Even models at the recent autumn shows had just as hard a time with total flats as they once did with killer stilettos. "Your hips and knees can get used to walking with smaller strides and at the slower pace that's common when wearing heels," says Dr Sullivan. "So when you switch to flats, which allow you to walk faster and with great strides, your body may get confused." To prevent problems, test out your flats first before you go the distance, and keep a slow pace until you're proficient at walking in them. ■