

WOMEN'S SHOES AND FOOT PROBLEMS

I think it is important to note that prior to my interest in foot and ankle surgery, I had no appreciation of the difficulties that women have in finding shoes that are comfortable and that fit well. Shoe manufacturers do not consider the shape of the average woman's foot when creating the newest fashions. Many common foot problems seen by orthopaedic surgeons are caused by improperly fitting shoes.

This problem was highlighted in a study done by the Council on Women's Shoewear of the American Orthopaedic Foot and Ankle Society. This study reported on the feet of 356 women. The width of the bare foot was measured while each woman was standing. The authors of this study found that 88% of those studies had shoes that were narrower than the foot by at least one half and inch. Eighty percent of women stated that they had some foot pain. The ones with no foot pain had shoes that measured only one quarter of an inch smaller than the width of the foot. Almost 80% of the women had some major forefoot deformity, such as bunions, hammer toes, calluses under metatarsal or small toe bunions. The average width of the foot ranged from 7½ to 11 centimetres in the women in the study.

These statistics cause concern because it makes one believe that there is a large portion of women who are wearing shoes that are too narrow, causing pain and creating foot deformities. The question should be asked, is this caused by an abnormal foot or are the shoes just too tight? It appears that the front portion of a woman's foot (forefoot) will spread after the age of 20 and the size of the shoe should go up during that period. As the forefoot spreads, the heel stays the same size because the heel is only a single bone. This creates a problem in fitting shoes because if you fit the forefoot, the heel slips off and if you fit the heel, the forefoot is squeezed into the shoe.

To illustrate the seriousness of wearing shoes that are too tight, I am going to go over some of the more common foot problems and deformities that are directly related to women wearing shoes that are too small and heels that are too high. The most common and most often talked about is a bunion. A bunion is a large swelling on the inside of the forefoot. A bunion is caused when the great toe veers to the outside and the bunion veers to the inside. Bunions are much more common in shoe-wearing cultures. The pain is caused by pressure on the actual bunion and most bunion problems can be relieved by wearing shoes that are wider and deeper.

Many women get calluses under the front portion of their feet by jamming their foot into a shoe that is too narrow. Most of these calluses can be alleviated by changing to a wider, deeper shoe and/or by placing metatarsal pads in the front part of the shoe to redistribute the weight. Some women get hard calluses or corns on the tops of their toes which are often associated with hammer toes or claw toes; the toes become permanently bent, crooked or cocked up from being in the same position, especially in tight high heels. Most of these problems can be alleviated by wearing wider, deeper shoes and a flatter heel.

Some women complain of intermittent burning pain in the foot. They often have to stop and remove the shoe or rub the foot. This is typical neuroma pain. This condition is a pinched nerve in the foot between two bones in the forefoot. It is really more like a callus along the nerve from excessive pressure inside the foot than a tumour. Relief can be obtained by just widening the shoe and lowering the heel.

Other women get a stiff big toe, with degenerative arthritis in the big toe joint, which creates a bump on the top of the joint and is aggravated by high heels. With

continued use of high heels and tight shoes this can get so bad that the big toe loses motion and is called Hallux Rigidus or stiff big toe. Most often this can be treated with a wider, deeper shoe that has a stiffer sole.

These conditions can be seen without shoes but there is no doubt that they can be caused and aggravated by improper fitting shoes.

Here are guidelines for shopping for proper fitting shoes:

1. Measure your foot with your full weight on it. Then take a six inch ruler with you and measure the shoe.
2. Shop at the end of the day when whatever swelling is present will usually be there.
3. Stay within $\frac{1}{4}$ to $\frac{1}{2}$ inch of the width of the widest part of your foot.
4. Avoid seams on painful areas
5. Exercise shoes should be as wide as the widest part of your foot. Often boys or men' shoes are cut more generously in the forefoot.
6. There is no standardisation in sizes in women's fashion, so you must measure the shoe you are looking at in the store, prior to trying it on.
7. Don't buy shoes that are too small and expect them to break in.
8. Wear a heel that is reasonable but fashionable.

The following is a list of brands that is a random compilation put together by asking patients, who had reasonable width shoes, where they got them from. Good luck!

Comfort & Fit Store – Artarmon, Randwick, North Parramatta

Peter Shepherd – City

Merv Adams – City

Footrest

Kumpf Shoes

Birkenstock sandals.

It is my hope, as a responsible physician, that an ounce of prevention can prevent a pound of cure and we can encourage women to find shoes that fit them in the proper fashion. Hopefully this will prevent deformities and disability.

Good luck!