

Manolo. Louboutin. Choo. Stiletto. Spike. Wedge. Flat.

You love them with all your heart. Your feet feel otherwise. Here, we break down what you need to know to keep your feet fashionable *and* in good health.

By Heather N. McCombs, DPM • Photography by John Reilly Photography



Shoes, shoes everywhere: Heather N. McCombs, DPM

As a fashion accessory, shoes speak volumes about us. They come in all shapes, colors and heights, can be fun, flirty, serious or adventurous and are often how we identify ourselves. And the one thing any woman will attest to is you can never have too many.

In our efforts to be stylish and keep up with the latest trends, we sometimes torment our feet, to the point that they don't "bounce back" after being fashionably tortured. Although you may be attracted to a shoe for its visual appeal, do you ask yourself what it will feel like after you've worn it all day? Probably not. I'm guilty of wearing fabulous shoes and looking for a flip-flop stand midway through the day to relieve my aching feet from their torturous devices.

Any podiatrist will tell you what not to wear, but seldom is there a great alternative that excites you. Often you leave your podiatrist's office distressed that for the sake of comfort you've been doomed to a life of what we sometimes term "orthopedic walking shoes." When shopping

for shoes, you're often faced with the dilemma of style or comfort; the marriage of the two seems foreign for many. Shoes are accessories: buy the comfortable, sensible shoes for daily wear, and the more frivolous ones for special occasions.

PROPER FORM

Few of us think of our foot as a piece of engineering marvel, but that's what it is. Twenty-eight bones, 35 joints and 38 muscles and ligaments hold the foot together and carry our entire body weight, in addition to the compounded effect of gravity on that structure. Activities such as running generate three times the normal force of walking. Precautions need to be taken to maintain feet in good structural alignment.

It's easy to see the foot in three sections: the forefoot, which includes the toes and the ball of the foot; the midfoot, which includes the bones and structures supporting the arch; and the rearfoot, the part of the

foot that connects the foot to the leg. When selecting shoes to maintain the integrity of the foot, keep in mind that a shoe, too, has several parts:

THE SOLE is the layer that touches the ground. Soles come in a number of materials and are the first layer to absorb the force that the ground applies to the foot.

THE INSOLE is the layer of padding, or the inner lining of the shoe. Pay attention to the insole, ensuring there is appropriate padding to make the shoe feel like your foot is resting comfortably.

THE TOEBOX, the area around the toes, should provide enough space to prevent the toes from being stacked on top of one another.

THE UPPER is the area of the shoe that makes most contact with the top of the foot. The upper should be checked to see if there are any rough seams; use your fingers to feel inside the area that might not be visible.

THE HEEL COUNTER is the area around the heel that reinforces it and keeps the ankle stable. Heel counters are important, especially in shoes you are using for walking or athletics. Never put on your gym shoes by sliding the foot in while they are tied, as this causes the counter to be weakened and give less support.

And lastly, there is **THE HEEL**, which comes in all shapes and sizes. Heels are usually the distinctive feature that attract or dissuade us, but above all they should be of a height and style you feel you are able to manage without effort.

THE BEST FIT?

It's hard to make a blanket statement about which shoe is the best shoe. I find women tend to function best in shoes that have a heel height of about one inch. Higher heels are fine for short intervals, but a two- to three-inch heel worn regularly can cause the back of the calf muscle to tighten and create a shortened Achilles tendon, thus creating discomfort when trying to wear lower heel heights or flats. These high heels thrust the foot forward and cause the ball of the foot to be the main shock-absorbing area, causing build-up of calluses and a pain across the ball of the foot known as metatarsalgia. While there are elements of shoes that make them ideal, one type of shoe that should always be avoided is the platform; it creates an unstable ankle and can cause severe injury if you should fall off your platforms.

The shoe should be large enough to accommodate the size of the foot. While this seems obvious, we often fall into the habit of "knowing our size" and succumb to a shoe that really would have been more comfortable one size up. This is especially common in today's fashion-conscious world where the long, slim foot is portrayed as an object of envy. Ladies, the width of the shoe is critical to appropriate fit! Bear in mind that no matter how attractive the shoe is, settling for a half size larger or smaller, or a narrower or wider width than appropriate, will make for a very uncomfortable fit. Have someone trace your foot on a piece of paper, then set your favorite shoe over it. Chances are that the silhouette of your foot will be larger than your shoe – not a good thing.

SUPPORTING PLAYER

Arch support is also a major issue when it comes to foot fashion over function. Lately the summer fad has been wearing flip-flops from the first hint of spring until the temperature forces the feet to seek more protection. We often think of these flat, rubber demons as providing a free, uninhibited covering, when in fact they are among the worst things you can wear!

The arch should be thought of in the same manner an engineer views a cornerstone of an arc: If the arch is unsupported, over time the bones of the foot will adapt to this flattened-out shape. This is accompanied by deformities such as bunions, hammertoes, corns, calluses, heel, knee and back pain. You may ask, "It's a foot – what does it have to do with the knee and the hip?" The hip, knee and ankle all work together to provide bipedal motion. If you think of what many patients describe as a "fallen arch," you can imagine how when the arch "falls," the heel moves

outward, widening the foot. Gradually the inner knee and the hip start to become uncomfortable.

I cannot stress how important a well-supported arch is in a shoe. There are designers (for example, Taryn Rose) who construct shoes with a well-formed arch. Wearing this type of shoe, the arch rests on a structure within the insole of the shoe so the foot is maintained in appropriate functional alignment.

Conversely, a number of designers do not put well-formed arches in their shoes, but don't despair; your podiatrist can create a pair of orthotic inserts that move from shoe to shoe (low heel or athletic type). Orthotics can be made from a variety of materials and are a great way to be able to wear shoes you find attractive but lacking in insole support. These can be custom-made for high heels and can incorporate padding to offload painful calluses. In fact, some brides anticipating a long day on their feet will bring their shoes in to be fitted well before the wedding, to ensure they're standing tall and comfortable on their big day.

TO THE POINT

Pointed-toe shoes, while enhancing the appearance of the long, slender foot, can compress the important structures between the toes and force the toes together. When this situation is the norm in shoe selection, bunions, hammertoes and neuromas develop. Bunions and hammertoes are self-explanatory, but neuromas? A neuroma is a swelling of the tiny nerve between the bones that support the toes. It gets irritated by the surrounding structures and starts to develop a layer of protective tissue around it. Now it's larger and takes up more space; with continuation of inappropriate, incorrectly-sized or the wrong type of shoes it starts to tingle and make the toes go numb. It also feels like either a small pebble in the shoe or like the seam of your stockings is bunched up and needs to be straightened. These are addressed most often with injections and padding, and very infrequently require surgery.

Feet are taxed heavily, going from an intense gym workout to a spike heel for an event; not to mention the miles trudged daily in the course of life. Seldom do they get the attention they need. If you start to think of your feet in the way that you do your face, I can assure you they will be in better shape. And I hate to be the one to break it to you, but a regular pedicure does not really address those painful bunions, hammertoes, calluses and nail issues. Pay attention and remember that just as glycolic acid is used on your face, it can be used for your feet. While structural deformities like painful calluses, bunions and hammertoes often require surgery to be corrected and there is no guarantee they will not return, padding around the painful areas can allow you to wear beautiful, fashionable shoes without agony.

The good news is you don't have to toss your heels to rid yourself of foot pain. Selecting shoes based on the criteria above and caring for your feet will combine fashion and comfort. Make sensible choices, take care of your feet and remember, in moderation and with caution and common sense, very little shoe gear is off limits. ■

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Shoes (left to right): Christian Louboutin ballerina flat, \$510; Taryn Rose Clare peep-toe sling back, \$485; Manolo Blahnik sling-back, \$525; Christian Louboutin ankle velvet boot, \$760; Heather's own "dress shoes"; Manolo Blahnik gray leopard open-toe, \$665; Heather's own "comfort shoes"; Taryn Rose Daphne wedge, \$495; Taryn Rose patent leather square pump, \$445; Gucci close-toe white heels, \$525. All shoes, except Heather's own, available at Neiman Marcus.