



HIGH PRAISE

Mr Mark Herron and Mr Nick Cullen, consultant orthopaedic surgeons at The Wellington Hospital reveal how you can enjoy stylish high heels and maintain healthy feet and muscles

Women have a lot to contend with in the name of fashion and one of the areas where it can be most painful if mistakes are made, is with the feet. "There is a huge amount of misinformation and half truths in the press and from various practitioners about the evils of fashion shoes and in particular high heels" says Nick Cullen of The Wellington Hospital Foot & Ankle Unit.

"The desire to wear fashionable and high-heeled shoes is inevitable, entirely understandable and also unstoppable," agrees Mark Herron. "It is an area where, with a little basic understanding of the way the foot works, there is no reason why many people shouldn't enjoy wearing fashion shoes without any undue sense of guilt or harming their feet.

"In our experience there really is very little evidence that deformity of the toes is caused by narrow fitting shoes or high heels," he explains. "One commonly cited problem with fashion shoes is that they cause bunions due to their narrow fit. When you look at a foot with a bunion, the primary underlying problem is that the foot is too wide at the level of the metatarsals rather than being too narrow, which very much goes against the theory."

Mark continues: "The factors associated with bunion formation include having a strong family history of bunions, being female and also the use of shoes. It is not fashion shoes, but any shoe wear which inevitably leads to relative inactivity of the small muscles of the foot – and it is probably this that is associated with the toe deformities we see."

Most high-heeled shoes have a pointed, narrow toe box that crowds the toes and forces them into an unnatural triangular shape. As heel height increases, the pressure under



the ball of the foot may double, placing greater pressure on the forefoot as it is forced into the pointed toe box.

"There are certainly some pre-existing conditions which will be exacerbated by the use of a narrow fitting shoe" says Nick. These in particular would be bunions or bunionettes (a widening of the foot associated with the fifth metatarsal on the outer border of the foot) and also Morton's Neuromas (a painful condition due to swelling of the nerves which sit between the toes and produce pain and tingling down into the toes in particular in shoe wear). "If a person already has toe deformities then certainly squeezing into narrow shoes may cause these deformed toes to rub on the shoe wear as well." So, if you are able to select a shoe with a wider toe, this will reduce the pressure on your toes and under the balls of your feet.

"The issue of high-heels is also one about which there is much confusion," says Mark. "If a woman has no toe deformities or calloused skin underneath the front part of the foot and stable ankles, then there is no reason why she shouldn't be wearing high heels as much as she wishes. There is certainly no evidence for causation of

toe deformities by high heels.

"It is important, however, that women understand that when they are in high-heels proportionally a lot more loading will go through the front of the foot. As the woman ages, the fat padding underneath this part of the foot tends to thin, and this can lead to pain under the front part of the foot if wearing heels over protracted periods of time."

One way around this can be to use more of a wedge type shoe which despite having the appearance of a high-heel has less difference between the heel and the front part of the foot. This type of shoe also tends to support the arch well and therefore uses affectively the whole sole of the foot for transferring weight rather than just loading disproportionately through the front part of the foot.

"All in all we both have a highly progressive and realistic approach to foot and ankle issues and if we can help you get back into high-heels and narrow fitting shoes then we will," say both surgeons.

For more information, call The Wellington Hospital Enquiry Helpline on 020 7483 5148 or visit www.wellingtonhospital.com