THE FOLLIES

BY JO OSTGARDEN
On the journey through life, your feet are two of your best friends. It’s time to treat them that way.

Quick! Name the woman whose stiletto obsession led to a rush on $400 shoes designed by Jimmy Choo and Manolo Blahnik. It’s Carrie Bradshaw, of course, the Sex and the City heroine portrayed by actress Sarah Jessica Parker—who confessed that the steep heels she wore while filming left her with permanently damaged tootsies.

Alas, human feet are, well ... complicated. Composed of 26 bones, 33 joints and more than 100 muscles, ligaments and tendons, feet are essentially the body’s foundation. Instead of torturing them, why not try a little podiatric pampering? You might just kick up your heels. >
A normal arch acts as a shock absorber for the entire body,” explains Bal Rajagopalan, MD—aka Dr. Raj—a Beverly Hills, Calif., orthopedic surgeon and a medical consultant for ABC News. “Each time you take a step, you’re loading up to five times your body weight onto that foot. A 6-inch heel typically has a 60 percent angle, which not only overloads the forefoot but also deforms the arch and reduces shock absorption and leads to inflamed nerves in your toes.” It can also shorten the calf muscles, which may cause inflammation of the Achilles tendon, resulting in painful tendinitis.

Eventually, all this distortion creates structural instability, Rajagopalan says, and can cause compression in the spine, which impinges the nerves running through it. This is especially true, he says, if your spine already curves forward more than normal. High heels also exert pressure on the fat pads under the ball of your foot, causing intense localized pain called metatarsalgia.

Stilettos, distinguished by thin, tapering heels, create even greater instability, and can make your foot wobble and cause ankle sprains.

THE FIX: Consider platforms, wedges or chunky high heels; they offer height but also, typically, more cushion. Critically, they spread the load and impact of each step across a greater surface area, Rajagopalan says.

CULPRIT 2
TIGHT SHOES
The majority of today’s high-fashion footwear is designed with a narrow, pointed profile that doesn’t bear much resemblance to the feet most of us were born with. Stuffing your feet into an unrealistic contour can make toes curl and cause “pump bumps,” knotty bone protrusions on the side of the heel. The repeated friction or pressure of ill-fitting shoes also can lead to corns (raised hard skin), calluses (diffuse patches of hardened skin) and bony enlargements (bunions) on the side of the big toe.

THE FIX: Do your feet hurt badly? Get a foot specialist (a podiatrist, a pedorthist or an orthopedic physician) to evaluate them. When deformities like corns and hammertoes become severe, Rajagopalan says, they typically require surgery to repair. You can prevent this by wearing shoes that accommodate a narrower heel and a wide forefoot, or decrease pressure at friction points.

TOES AND NOSE
Each pair of human feet contains about a half-million sweat glands, so if you lace them up all day in a pair of nonbreathable shoes, they’re likely to get sweaty. Sweat causes the bacteria count inside of your shoes to increase, leading to stinky feet. The solution: Wash and dry your feet thoroughly, every day; wear socks made of wool or synthetic fibers designed to wick moisture; and rotate your shoes daily. Besides creating an odor, sweat can also lead to athlete’s foot (tinea pedis), a fungus that loves dank places like shoes and locker room shower stalls. It can make your feet itch like crazy. This problem doesn’t go away on its own; treat it with an antifungal balm or straight tea tree oil.
CULPRIT 3

HEALTH CONDITIONS

The inflammation of osteoarthritis and gout can cause foot swelling and pain. Being overweight stresses foot muscles and joints, which leads to structural instability, and even foot ulcers. Diabetes also increases the risk of foot ulcers and nerve damage. Toenail fungus can be a problem for people with diabetes and rheumatoid arthritis and other immune deficiencies.

If you’re pregnant, swelling in your feet is usually normal but can be a sign of preeclampsia (pregnancy-related high blood pressure). Some medications can also cause swollen feet, especially those used to treat high blood pressure.

THE FIX: Diabetics should inspect their feet daily and keep blood sugar levels under control to prevent foot ulcers. See a doctor if you notice open wounds or toenail problems. Untreated ulcers can lead to serious infections and even amputation.

If you have a chronic health condition and begin to notice numbness or prickly pain in your feet, have a foot specialist check for neuropathy, or nerve damage. Avoid going barefoot to reduce potential foot injury. Your doctor may recommend padded socks and specialized footwear to reduce pressure and speed healing. If you’re pregnant, pack away your pumps. Look for shoes with a wide forefoot and adjustable straps that accommodate the intermittent swelling that can occur any given day during pregnancy.

CULPRIT 4

HIGH-IMPACT EXERCISE

Distance runners, race-walkers, and serious hikers and backpackers are prone to a long list of foot woes, including corns, calluses, blisters, athlete’s foot, fungal infections, plantar fasciitis, Achilles tendinitis and metatarsalgia. Most problems are a result of high-mileage training or excursions, and ill-fitting or worn-out footwear.

THE FIX: Replace running shoes every 400 to 600 miles. And be sure they fit correctly (unless you’re buying exact replacements, don’t order online).

Orthopedists and podiatrists are divided about barefoot-style running shoes. Before the invention of footwear, humans mostly went barefoot. In the past few years, going barefoot or wearing barefoot-style shoes while running and hiking has gained popularity. Proponents claim the shoes are the fix for a wide assortment of foot ills. As for technical innovations in other athletic footwear, such as corrective devices and enhancements designed to alter biomechanical deficiencies (weakness, inflexibility), the jury is most definitely out.

TIRED TOOTSIES

Dogs barking from too much walking or running? Before you spend a pocket full of cash on new sneakers or over-the-counter shoe inserts, check with your podiatrist to see if a custom-made corrective device may be a better choice.

“With more people running for their health, I’m seeing an increase in patients with foot pain related to heal issues, stress fractures and tendinitis,” says podiatrist Trenton Statler, DPM, of Podiatry Associates of Beaufort. “Orthotic inserts support the foot and can relieve fatigue and heel pain that comes with overuse from exercising or standing on your feet for extended periods.”

Put Your Best Foot Forward

Are high heels your best accessory? Then bunions may turn out to be your worst enemy. Contact one of Beaufort Memorial’s podiatrists for your foot-related issues. Visit bmhsc.org/find-provider for a list of podiatrists in your area.