

# Is Your Fashion Sense Hurting Your Health?

From skyscraper heels and skinny jeans to oversized It Bags, most of us are ready to suffer for style—after all, beauty is pain right? Well, not necessarily. We delve into the uncomfortable truth behind some of our favourite trends and their potential impact on your health.

*By Yi-Hwa Hanna*



Let's face it: If a piece of apparel leaves you wincing, it's probably not good for you to keep wearing it as it is—no matter how great it makes your butt look. Yet in today's highly fashion-conscious world, many of us still seem to think it's ok to suffer for the sake of style. It's a not a new phenomenon limited to the modern world, either: Women have been gritting their teeth for the sake of fashion throughout history, be it with far too tightly-laced corsets in the 1800s or Chinese foot-binding during the Song Dynasty.

Despite the fact that fashion has evolved with the times, and that the associated risks seem to have reduced considerably from times past, certain style-related quandaries can still pose serious hazards to our health. That doesn't mean you have to give up your favourite pair of heels just yet though—it's just a question of knowing your limits, and how to wear certain items and when. We spoke to the experts to get the safety low-down on these modern-day style essentials.



## HIGH HEELS

As every girl who's ever tromped around in a pair of 4-inch stiletto heels all night has experienced, as much as we love the way they make us look (and feel), they can hurt like crazy after an hour or so, not to mention the next day. "The weight distribution on the feet is more concentrated when wearing high heels, but the problem is really that high heels tend to put the foot into a position which places certain muscles in a lengthened position, and others in shortened positions. Over time, this can lead to changes in movement patterns and predispose individuals to injury," explains Robyn Stanford, a Physiotherapist at optimalTHERAPY.

And it's not just what they do to our feet that poses problems—very high heels can alter our standing posture, which means there's extra pressure placed on our knees and lower back. "The angle of the heels forces the knees into hyperextension or being 'locked.' This in turn tilts the pelvis anteriorly or forwards, which increases the curve of the lower back and places pressure on the facet joints. This can cause inflammation and stiffening in the back, and lead to a tired, dull ache pain in the lower back," Robyn says. Sonja Belgard, a Physiotherapist with Platform 3 Fitness, agrees: "While wearing high heels from time to time is totally fine, doing so daily for long periods of time can cause some damage in the foot, the calf and your posture. What we experience the day after wearing heels is mainly muscle tension and wrong pressure points on the foot, so isn't something too serious to worry about—but when we do



this too often, the natural shape of our foot suffers. The pressure on the ball of the foot increases (rather than being spread out evenly), the natural tension between the toes loosens up, and the archillies tendons (large calf muscles) shorten, which can cause pain when you're walking on flats again. Constantly wearing high heels can also put your spine in the wrong position, which may cause back pain."

### CAUSE AND EFFECT

Margaret Dabbs—a renowned foot expert, podiatrist and the founder of The Sole Lounge at Level Shoe District, a foot spa that fuses health with beauty by providing pedicures done by professional podiatrists and nail technicians—says that wearing the wrong shoes can even impact the skin and nails on our feet. If a shoe that you wear often is too tight, for instance, or boasts a toe area that pushes the toes together,

it can actually cause your toenails to become thicker or for your skin to form hard lumps in the area. "It's the side of the toe being pressed on. When it's being pressed again and again, the cells will renew themselves. They don't know how to respond to it, which results in the skin and nails in that area becoming thicker," Margaret explains. "If you're wearing shoes that are too narrow, you might end up with corns on your feet. High heels can be quite dehydrating as well—you're putting your feet under pressure so there's a massive blood flow there; because of that feet get hot and they swell and the skin breaks, which leads to dehydration and dry skin," she adds.

So does this mean we have to give up our favourite heels? Not necessarily—we just have to be careful not to wear them too often, learn to stand and walk properly in them, and be sure to stretch them out often. For instant relief, Sonja says a warm foot bath and gentle rub can help with recovery, while for more long-term release of discomfort, Robyn suggests some stretching. "There are actually exercises one can do to strengthen these muscles and

minimise the impact of any lengthening that has occurred, [while] stretching the calf is simple and effective and can even be done during the evening in the bathroom or a quiet corner," she says.

Platforms are another good option, according to Sonja: "[Unlike with stilettos], with platform heels the pressure is on the whole foot, rather than only the ball of the feet. Just be careful not to twist your ankle though!" she says, adding that it's still wise to only wear these from time to time since we can't naturally roll our feet in them, particularly with pointed-toe heels since they squeeze the toes together. The moral of the story here? "Switch your shoes around [often] and don't always wear the same model," Sonja says.

## BALLET FLATS

Now a staple in most women's shoe cabinets, ballet flats often seem like a safer (and comfier) alternative to high heels. But while non-heeled shoes don't pose the same pressure on our soles that heels do, over-use of certain types such as ballet flats can cause other problems:

"Flat-soled shoes such as pumps provide little to no

**High heels can** *alter our posture which means there's extra pressure on our* **knees and back /**

support for the arches of the feet. This is a problem when walking a lot or wearing them all day as the feet are unable to roll inwards, increasing the load on the inside of the knees as well as the arch of the foot," says Robyn, continuing: "The lack of support means that the muscles which control and lower the arch of the foot may become strained, inflamed and very tight. Repeated straining and inflammation within these muscles could potentially lead to the development of Plantar Fasciitis and other tendonitis problems."

Wearing ballet pumps too often can even change the shape of our foot and even potentially make them bigger, particularly as we age: "As you get older, the soft tissues on our feet, like on the rest of your body can become a bit lax. If you're carrying any extra weight, this presses down on the now-softer tissues, which causes your foot to spread out—this is why people often say their feet tend to get bigger when they're pregnant. People wearing ballet pumps often (as many pregnant women do) have no support on the arches of their feet, thus they flatten and elongate. The tendons stretch. You can rebuild the arches and exercise them, or wear orthotic shoes to help support them, but it's better to stop it happening in the first place," Margaret says. While she agrees that ballet flats are a comfortable option, wearing them safely with no negative impact on our feet is a question of how often we wear them and for how long—much like with her philosophy on heels,

Margaret suggests switching things up regularly. "Go from [flat shoes to] wedges to stiletto heels to platforms often—alternate them, even in the same day. This makes a big difference," she advises.

## SHAPEWEAR

In January this year, an influx of online articles questioning whether our shapewear was "squeezing our organs" caused a ruckus on the internet. Dramatic, we know. But how much truth is there to the sensational headlines? To a certain extent, yes, shapewear *can* squash our insides—but only if it's not being worn right.

"In order to help us look slimmer, shapewear is squashing everything it contains into a smaller than normal space. If too tight, the hollow organs such as the stomach, intestines and colon will be compressed, preventing the normal passage of food and gas through the gut with resulting bloating discomfort and possible acid reflux. This can lead to heartburn and eventually, oesophagitis," says Dr. Carol Smylie, Family Medicine Specialist at Health Bay Polyclinic Uptown Mirdif. "Over the centuries, women have tried to squeeze themselves into smaller sizes (it used to be with whalebone, corsets and laces), so there's nothing new here. Wearing shapewear garments for a short period of time is unlikely

## Anything squeezing you together so tight it makes breathing difficult isn't good for you /

to cause you any harm, so as long as you buy the correct size and don't try to shoehorn yourself into something three sizes too small," she adds.

Heather Thomson, Founder and CCO of the body shaping clothing line Yummie by Heather Thomson, agrees: "Anything squeezing you together so tight that it makes breathing difficult isn't good for you, which is part of the reason why I created Yummie—from a selfish initiative," she says, explaining: "I had just had my children and wasn't feeling great about my body, and I wanted something to smooth me out but didn't look like my grandmother's girdle! Yummie isn't going to make you lose five pounds; it will not suck you in. It'll smooth you out and make you look as good as you feel. But if you want to look like you've had some serious weight loss, eat healthy and get to the gym, woman!"

## THE RIGHT FIT

Both Heather and Tanya Ivin Karam, Marketing Manager of K-Lynn Lingerie, agree that the golden rule of shopping for shapewear is to buy a piece that is true to size.

"If you size up you will experience bunching; if you size down you will have riding and rolling, and you will be miserable," Heather says. "The key to selecting shapewear is identifying what you're trying to achieve from wearing it. It could be taming your tummy, slimming your thighs or boosting your behind. Just as women come in different shapes, shapewear is available in many shapes and sizes, fitting every type of occasion. [It] also comes in multiple fabrics to suit your climate; you can get thick or thin-as-air

shapewear, to ensure that you are streamlining your figure comfortably, no matter the weather," Tanya explains.

Choosing the right fabric is essential, since overly tight or too-warm apparel can lead to rubbing or chafing. "The hairs on the skin become damaged at their base and skin bacteria become 'rubbed in', occasionally causing a folliculitis. This is an infection or inflammation of the hair follicle, causing an unsightly rash. The best way to avoid this is to wear looser clothing until the skin settles, and to only wear the tight stuff for short periods of time," says Carol. "No clothing should cause rashes or infections—yikes! If you experience anything like that, take the d\*mn thing off!" Heather adds. It's important to look for garments made with breathable fabrics for warmer weather: Yummie's shapewear is lightweight and knit with Outlast® technology, which helps to balance temperature.

As for doubling, or even tripling, up on shapewear like some celebrities are rumoured to do, this can be done but isn't recommended. "If you have an event and it will make you feel better [to do so], then do as the celebs do but I can't imagine it's comfortable," says Heather, who suggests doubling up by wearing different types of garments on top of each other instead—rather than simply wearing two of the exact same shapewear pieces atop each other. "This means wear a shaping thong under a slip or bottom, under a tank. This way you do have extra layers of shaping, but it's not all hitting you in the same spot. Safer and more comfortable!"

To make sure you're wearing the right fit and keeping things







*Sure, you can rock shoulder dusters but keep 'em light!*

safe, try Tanya's top three tips: First, distinguish your body type. Next, identify problem areas that need taming. "Not everyone will need to flatten their tummy or slim their thighs, so make sure you pick shapewear for specific key areas," she says. Third, size does matter: "It shouldn't be uncomfortable. If you're a medium dress size, then you're likely a medium in shapewear. It should be tight enough to smooth out your figure but not so tight that you feel you can't move—similarly, it shouldn't be so loose that it doesn't serve its purpose," Tanya explains.

## DANGLY EARRINGS

We've all seen pictures (or real-life renditions) of the punk trend known as ear-lobe stretching, but what if you're not intentionally trying to stretch your lobes out and are just concerned about those

ultra-glamorous shoulder-duster earrings doing so accidentally instead? "Wearing heavy earrings can [indeed] pull the lobes and piercing holes out of shape. Very heavy ones can also slice open the earlobe and split it in two," Carol says. After a certain point is reached—which varies on the elasticity of your skin—these changes can actually be permanent, although they can be corrected by a plastic surgeon. "Certain cultures consider stretched lobes and piercing holes to be beautiful, but if your culture doesn't, then just stick to lightweight earrings and keep the heavier ones for special occasions."

According to Dr. Marwa El Badawi, a Dermatologist at Kaya Skin Clinic, stretching out a piercing can also make it look like a slit rather than a hole. You might even end up with the whole ear stretched and elongated, especially on

the earlobes. "You should only wear large, dangly earrings for short, interrupted periods, and certainly avoid sleeping in them," Dr. El Badawi says.

So how do you know how much is too much? "If you notice the piercing hole becoming pear-shaped, then your earrings are consistently too heavy," Carol says.

## PHONE COVERS

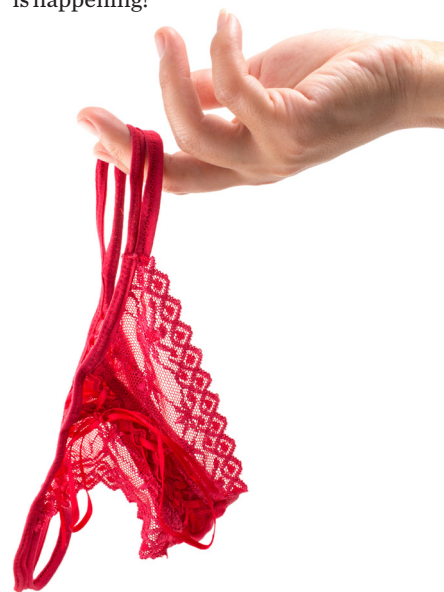
That glamorous, rock-chic studded phone cover you've been toting for the past year? It could be giving you adult acne. "Phones are frequently passed between people, which causes the spread of germs. Also, they are rarely ever cleaned, which suggests the diseases keep on building up. Research has found that bugs get onto our phones because they are so close to our hands and mouths. When you let a friend or a stranger use your mobile, their bacteria is easily transferred onto the device too—thus, you should regularly disinfect your phone with an antiseptic regularly and frequently, and replace your phone cover with a new one as often as possible," says Dr. Al Badawi.

"The bacteria largely come from our hands, mouth and nose in the first place—so if you only handle your own phone and have no existing skin infections, you are not going to have any problems," Carol says, continuing: "If you have a sore on your face or hands you can transfer the bacteria to your phone. Passing a phone to someone else can potentially pass on infections as well." She suggests washing your hands regularly, as well as giving your phone the occasional clean with an antibacterial wipe to cut down on this risk.

## SKINNY JEANS

An ill-fitting pair of skinny jeans can do more than just damage our ego—a number of reports in the past several years have claimed that wearing too-tight trousers can potentially lead to Meralgia

Paresthetica, a condition caused when overly tight-fitting clothing compresses a nerve in the groin close to the surface of the skin, leading to feelings of numbness, prickliness, tingling, burning or pain at the front or side of the thigh. But much like shapewear, wearing these jeans safely is a question of ensuring you have the right size on: "Skinny jeans, if fitting snugly but not tightly, are not going to cause you any problems," says Carol. "However, if too tight, as well as compressing the abdomen they can also press on the superficial nerve of the thigh where it passes in front of the pelvic bone, causing Meralgia Paresthetica." While relieving the pain is simple and instant—all you have to do is remove the offending piece of clothing—wearing too-tight skinny jeans for long periods of time can lead to more persistent symptoms. If you're worried about your legs falling off though, don't fret—Carol says this would only occur in a truly extreme situation: "The jeans would have to be very tight (like a tourniquet) to cut off circulation. I haven't actually heard of this happening, but if your feet and lower legs turn white, then blue, and are painful, then get those jeans off as soon as possible and whizz down to your nearest A&E department to check out what is happening!"



## THONG UNDERWEAR

Sacrificing comfort to avoid a dreaded Visible Panty Line is an underwear option many of us choose on a near-daily basis, but be warned: once again, if you're wearing something that is too tight, it could lead to some ugly outcomes—both literally and figuratively. “The anus, urethra and vaginal openings are all quite close together, so tight underwear such as thongs that ‘rub’ can transfer bacteria from the anal area to the urethral opening. This is a potential cause of urinary tract infections,” Carol says. Made even worse in warm weather, uncomfortable and too-tight thong underwear in non-breathable fabrics can also lead to chafing and nasty infections. “The combination of hot weather, causing the bacteria and fungi present on our skin to proliferate, and tight, synthetic underwear—which increases sweating—are likely to increase problems such as thrush. Comfortable natural fibres such as cotton are better than synthetic ‘cheese cutter’ thongs, which may rub and cause sores,” Carol says. In short, it's always better to opt for thongs in natural, breathable fabrics that fit well—and making sure they're clean and changed often should be a given—for the safest way to wear them. Alternatively, you can always consider going commando: “To avoid the VPL it might be better to wear none at all!” Carol laughs. Well, if it's on doctor's orders...

## OVERSIZED BAGS

The next time you're doing your best Olsen twin impression, just be wary not to stuff that oversized bag with too many heavy items: not only can lugging around too much stuff give us temporary back and shoulder aches, it can actually hurt our necks and backs in the long run, not to mention our bone structure.

“Many of us have jobs which require us to sit in one position for long periods of time without moving, stretching or straightening up much. We fall into bad habits, and [often end up holding] our neck and shoulders in positions that allow our trapezius and neck muscles to become over-active. When carrying heavy handbags, we often use those same muscles to lift the bag up towards our ear and keep it in place. This means that the weight of the bag is directly on these muscles, rather than being supported by our bone structure. If the correct posture can be taught—namely, moving the shoulder blade back into place so that the supporting bone structure is in the correct alignment—the muscles are then in a better position to take the weight,” Robyn says.

Wearing a backpack or using a small, rolling suitcase is the desired alternative, according to Sonja—but if this isn't an option, she suggests wearing the bag across your shoulder as there will be more stability and the pressure is shared. You



don't have to leave all your essentials at home, and Robyn says there are a few simple things we can do to further minimise the effect. “The body and its supporting muscles work in diagonals. A heavy bag on the shoulder can affect the lower back, as we compensate and twist our spines to accommodate the weight. Swap sides regularly, and make sure the strap of the bag is not cutting into the muscle. The most important thing is to be aware of the position of the neck and shoulders: Your shoulders should be back, with the blades flat against the ribs, relaxed away from the ears. We often hold our tension in this area,” she says. Stretching your neck is key for alleviating much of the discomfort. “The key is simply good, pain-free movements throughout the day,” Robyn advises. ■

## BABY GOT BACK

Want to strengthen your shoulder and upper back muscles? Try these exercise suggestions from Sonja Belgard, *WHME* Advisory Board Member, Physiotherapist and Personal Trainer at Platform 3.

1

Lie on your tummy with your arms to your side in a 90 degree position, lifting them up and squeezing your shoulder blades together. Alternatively, place your arms beside you whilst lying on your front, lift them up and twist your thumb backwards, upwards, while squeezing your shoulder blades together. Repeat these exercises three times with 15 repetitions each, once a day.

2

Stretches for your neck will also help with tension—you can perform these sitting down or standing up: Put your spine in a straight position, tuck your chin in (as if you have a double chin!), place your hand on your ear over your head, and gently pull your head to the side. Hold the stretch for a minute, then stretch the other side.

3

Another great move for the back of your neck is to place your hands on your head and gently pull your head downwards towards your chest, while remaining in an upright spinal position.