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What NOT To Wear: Sexy High Heels And Laid-Back Flip Flops

BY KERRI KRAMER, MSPT AND DR. STEVEN BERKEY

Many triathletes spend hundreds of dollars each year for the perfect running shoes and replace them routinely in efforts to stave off injury. Triathletes also spend money on over-the-counter inserts and custom-made orthotics to absorb shock and improve alignment. So how is it possible that foot and ankle pain can creep up on you despite these diligent efforts? Triathletes beware: the culprits lie in your closets, and it's not your running shoes. For women and men alike, those easy-to-wear flip flops are responsible for a great deal of foot and ankle issues. Moreover, for ladies who like to show a little style outside of their run, bike, and swim apparel, the source of pain is the torturous high heels worn at work and on a night out. Both high heels and flip flops can cause pain anywhere in your body from your feet all the way up to your back, and they do so in two completely different ways.

Calling all flip-floppers...

It's common for physical therapy clinics to see an increase in patients with foot, knee, or back pain during the summer months when people transition to less supportive shoes, like flip flops. As a result of the lack of overall support in general and arch support in particular, gravity can wreak havoc on the joints and structures of the legs and back.

In most cases, flip flops don't have to be avoided, but should be used in moderation and only under certain conditions. Walking for short time or distance on relatively flat, even terrain shouldn't be much of a problem. This is good news for those people who enjoy the not-so-confining feel of flip flops on warm summer days.

However, there are several situations in which flip flops should be avoided. First, playing an ultimate frisbee game in your flip flops is the ultimate no-no! Spur of the moment pick-up games like ultimate frisbee or badminton at the family reunion are ankle sprains waiting to happen. Plan ahead and put a pair of athletic sneakers in your trunk just in case. Second, if you are planning a day trip to Kings Dominion or a multiple-day trip to Disney World, bring your supportive athletic shoes. Hard, concrete surfaces are unforgiving and require arch and heel support. Lastly, consider your terrain: for example, hiking involves varied, uneven surfaces that can prove to be problematic for loose-fitting flip flops that have minimal traction.

In order to minimize the negative impact flip flops can bring, there are several steps you can take to protect your feet, knees, and back while enjoying the convenient freedom of flip flops.

- Select a more supportive style and brand of flip flops. For example, both Birkenstock and Teva offer a wide variety of orthopedically-sound options.
- Skip the 3 for \$10 sales. Flip flops are generally inexpensive by nature. Don't skimp so much that you may as well be walking in your bare feet. A general test is if you can fold your flip flops in half they aren't rigid enough. Splurge for ones that have a more rigid, supportive foot bed.
- One side doesn't fit all. Wearing a flip flop that is too small will cause your foot to hang over the sides and the back. A flip flop that is too large will be a tripping hazard and your toes will be more likely to work overtime to secure the shoe to your foot. Take the time to try on a couple of different sizes and buy the ones that are right for your feet!

Calling All Ladies...

You know American women are at their limits when Oprah dedicates her entire one-hour show to the search for a fashionable, minimally-painful high-heeled shoe. (Note: optimal comfort was not even a feasible goal.) Here's the bottom line: no heel is a good heel.

When a woman steps into a heeled shoe, several detrimental biomechanical alterations occur. Increased pressure is placed on the forefoot ranging from 22% in a 1-inch heel to 76% in a 3-inch heel. This pressure may lead to pain at the balls of the feet (metatarsalgia), bunions, and hammer toes. A general rule is the pointier the shoe, the worse the conditions can become. When women consistently wear high heels, the Achilles tendon adaptively shortens because of the position of the foot. This can comprise your training because, when back in a running shoe, the shortened Achilles tendon now has to lengthen from its unnatural, assumed position. This can lead to tearing of the Achilles tendon and/or tendonitis. Moreover, the knees take a beating as they shift into a bowed position and become hyperextended. This biomechanical fault has a high potential to lead to premature

arthritis underneath the kneecap, as well as along the inside part of the knee-joint line. As if all of this isn't bad enough, the pelvis tilts forward leaving you no choice but to extend your spine backward in an effort to stand up straight, leading to back pain. Thanks to your new pair of 3-inch pumps, you have a strong sense of professionalism and you noticed that cute mailman checking you out, but your body is screaming for the madness to end. So what is a girl to do if she just can't tear herself away from the high-heeled look? Consider the following:

- Try to buy a shoe with a rectangular-shaped toe box over a sharp, pointed one.
- Shop for shoes in the evening, when your feet are swollen.
- When trying shoes on, fit the larger foot, as one foot may be slightly larger than the other.
- Buy a shoe with a thicker insole, as it helps reduce at least some shock that is passed onto your body.
- Look at buying a shoe with a larger width or chunky heel as both of these disperse ground reaction forces better than a stiletto.
- Remember that, the lower the heel, the better for your feet and body!

Summer is here. Don't throw all of your hard work and training away by abusing your feet. Take care of them to ensure a long, successful triathlon season.

Steve Berkey, DPT, is a practicing orthopedic physical therapist specializing in manual therapy and sports enhancement. He has undergone extensive post-doctorate training in the sports enhancement areas of bike fitting, running assessments, bike assessments, and custom orthotics. Steve recently wrote and published an e-book on bike fitting for all the do-it-yourselfers who want to enhance performance and reduce the risk of injury. It is an extensive resource from the self-proclaimed, waiting-to-be-discovered guru of biomechanical bike fitting! Visit his website at www.90Revolutions.com for more information and a special discount for all Tri-DC readers.

Kerri Kramer, MSPT, has seven years of experience as an orthopedic physical therapist. She obtained her strength and conditioning certification in 2003 and is currently working toward a doctoral degree in physical therapy. She has been competing in triathlons for four years and has a passion for treating endurance athletes.

Both Steven and Kerri currently work for the Jackson Clinics. For more information, visit www.thejacksonclinics.com.