

Are Foot and Ankle Problems Worse for Women?

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For many years, research on foot and ankle pain and deformity has focused on shoes. In fact, shoe style is the most studied extrinsic factor for foot and ankle injuries in women. Athletic shoes for women, for instance, have traditionally been designed as scaled-down versions of men's shoes. New research shows that women's feet are not just smaller versions of men's feet and that there are differences in foot structure, muscle strength, ligament laxity, joint surface area, cartilage thickness and gait that lead to a predisposition to pain and injury in females. These studies will help promote design changes to women's shoes to accommodate these intrinsic differences between men and women's feet.

Studies show that 88 percent of women wear shoes too small for their feet and 70 percent were noted to have associated bunion deformity. Women are 4 times more likely to have bunions than men. Hammer-toes are 5 times more common in women than men. Poorly fitting shoes affect more than just feet. Shoes with a heel of 1.5" or higher increase knee torque with walking. This may explain the increase in knee arthritis among women who prefer higher-heeled shoes.

Numerous studies have examined footwear in elderly patients at the time of a fall and have shown that a high percentage of those who fell were wearing slippers. The excessive flexibility of slippers and their lack of stability are associated with a higher incidence of tripping and falls.

The two main criteria for selecting shoes are 'fit' and 'comfort'. This means correct length, width and height, appropriate arch support and shock absorption. Remember that foot deformities that are associated with poorly fitting shoes occur over a long period of time. Occasional use of high heel shoes and for short periods of time is well tolerated.



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