

The painful price of high heels?

What do AMAL CLOONEY, VICTORIA BECKHAM, and NIGELLA have in common? They are all members of the BUNION brigade! But is it high heels, genes or bad luck that's to blame?

WHAT EXACTLY IS A BUNION?

It's a deformity at the base of the big toe that causes it to angle inwards, forming a bony bump on the side of your foot. This will gradually grow larger over time, especially if you don't take preventative measures. Podiatrists use the Manchester Scale to rank the severity of bunions, with zero meaning there's no problem and four indicating an advanced deformity. It's also possible to get bunions at the base of your little toe.

ARE HIGH HEELS THE PROBLEM?

'Your genes are the most likely culprit, as the underlying cause is thought to be a weakness in the big toe joint,' says Dr Pixie McKenna from Channel 4's Embarrassing Bodies. 'But poorly fitting shoes can transform a manageable issue to an absolute nightmare. Heels force the foot into a position that puts all the pressure on this sensitive point.' This forces the joint to change position, which pulls the tendons and ligaments tight, altering the shape of the toes and producing the bump.

SHOULD I LEARN TO LOVE MY FLATS, THEN?

Act early to stop bunions getting worse, and you may be able to avoid surgery or at least delay it. Avoid shoes with seams that go over the bunion, advises podiatrist Dr Emma Supple from SuppleFeet. Look for a deep toe box that

leaves some wiggle room. You can also buy gel or fleece pads to stick over the bunion, using adhesive or a loop that goes over your big toe. These will take pressure off the joint and soften the impact of rubbing shoes. Dr Supple also recommends buying orthotics, which slip discreetly inside your shoes and balance the way your weight is distributed when you walk. If your feet are painful at the end of a long day, treat them with an ice pack wrapped in a towel. This reduces inflammation and relieves the pain. You can also take a standard painkiller, but don't rely on these long term.

WHAT ELSE CAN CAUSE THEM?

Well, you're more likely to get bunions if you already have a condition such as gout, cerebral palsy or rheumatoid arthritis, or if you've experienced trauma to that part of the foot. Your family history may highlight an increased risk, and women tend to get them more than men.

WHAT ABOUT SURGERY?

If your main concern is the way your bunions look and they aren't causing you significant pain, surgery probably isn't worth it. The expert advice is to wait as long as possible – and not to do both feet at once. However, surgery is the only way to entirely remove a painful bunion and, if it is causing loss of function, you can get

the op on the NHS. The most common procedure involves cutting the tightened tissues attached to the big toe and removing the bony bump and sections of the metatarsal. The surgeon will then straighten the toe, leaving pins to hold it stable. Recovery times vary, explains Dr McKenna, but she warns that you will spend at least six weeks on crutches with a surgical shoe. Possible side effects include pain in the ball of your foot, as your body adapts to an altered shape, and you will still need to trade your tight footwear for shoes that give your toes space to move. 'Don't expect to be back in your party shoes for six months!' says Dr McKenna. And still the bunion may come back or even appear on the other foot.

Foot note...

While doctors aren't sure of the definitive cause, it is clear that high heels and tight shoes will make bunions worse. Those stilettoes might seem appealing now, but if you've already spotted a bunion forming, it's a good idea to trade them for a pair of flats most of the time. □

