

ORGANIC LIVING

By

Robert Rodale

Fashion and Foot Health Don't Mix

Feet are something we never think about until they start hurting. Then, we can't stop thinking about them because the searing pain becomes so intense.

Unfortunately, the pain in our feet is related directly to the shoes we wear. The fact is that we'd all be better off if we didn't wear any shoes at all.

Consider what Dr. John P. Barrett, Jr., an Air Force orthopedic surgeon, said in a recent issue of "Modern Medicine" about going shoeless: "With people in other countries who don't wear shoes, there is almost no such thing as painful flat feet in adults. And they do get flat feet. Painful flat feet seem confined to the shoe-wearing population, an indication that the shoe may aggravate the situation."

Having flat feet isn't the only problem confronting the shoe-wearer. There are also corns, calluses, bunions and ingrown toenails, which are all, except for calluses, directly related to wearing shoes. People who don't wear shoes do get calluses, but in that case, the hardened flesh is actually beneficial. The calluses people get from wearing shoes don't help at all and are downright painful.

The reason feet wind up wracked with pain involves the shoe's design. A part of the body that should be free and unfettered, the foot is squeezed, forced and pinched into a contraption more suited to the tool box of a Medieval torturer than to a modern wardrobe.

High-heeled shoes, for example, pitch the body forward and throw it out of line. To keep from falling on their faces, people who wear high heels must stand back on their haunches.

To remain upright, the muscles must pull the body back, causing a hump at the back of the neck and a hollow in the back at the waist. This results in pain to the lower



back and shoulders. It can also cause headaches and put pressure on the deep blood vessels that supply the legs and stomach.

Everytime a person takes a step in high-heeled shoes, the toes are forced forward, compressing them like a vise and causing the formation of bunions and corns. Another problem shoe is the new platform style, which seems to be attracting more and more men and women. Most of the problems of platforms revolve around the dangers of simply walking around in the awkward things. And people who wear platforms adopt an unnatural gait, which throws the body into unusual contortions.

Aside from a very few exceptions, most shoes sold today aren't what the doctor orders. Some synthetic materials used in shoes cause foot allergies. Since leather stretches, the person who wears a loafer style has to curl his toes just to keep them on, resulting in a lot of pressure on the front of the foot.

When you're shopping for shoes, keep in mind that the best shoe is no shoe. Sandals are good as long as the straps don't rub, as are soft Indian moccasins. But the oxford shoe is probably the best all-round shoe for general wear.

Support isn't as important as most people might believe. Some podiatrists say that support tends to actually weaken the foot by hampering natural freedom and activity.

You should buy shoes that give your foot freedom with room for your toes to move. The heels should be low to prevent calf muscles from shortening. If you're already hooked on high heels and find it painful to walk either barefooted or in low heels, try stretching your muscles gradually by knocking a half-inch off your heels every month or two. Eventually, you'll be down to a more healthy level.

Like other parts of your body, feet need exercise. Each foot contains 16 bones, 20 muscles and 33 joints. To keep such complex mechanisms in good working order, you have to use them.

As Dr. Barrett and others have observed, you should go barefoot as much as possible. That is a much more natural way of walking than wobbling along on a platform inches above the crowd.

Besides walking barefoot whenever you can, try picking up pencils or marbles with your toes while you're watching TV. Wiggle your toes often. Stretch them. Spread them out wide.

If you have any foot problems at all, a podiatrist is the person to see—if you can find one. There is a severe shortage of foot doctors. A spokesman from the Pennsylvania College of Podiatric Medicine reports that there are only about 8,000 podiatrists in the entire U.S. Many areas have no foot care available on a regular basis.

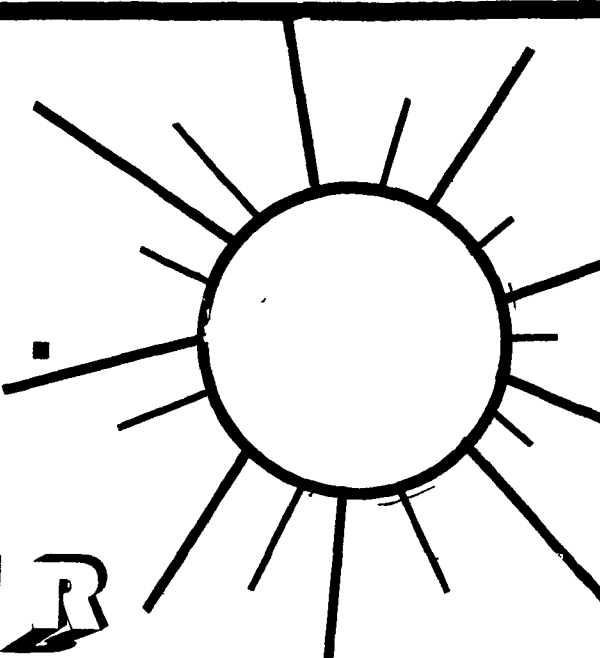
It would be much better if you never have to see a podiatrist, and your chances of avoiding such a visit will be better if you shop more carefully. Better care starts at the shoe store.

Editor's Note: The opinions appearing in "Organic Living" are those of the author, Robert Rodale, an independent columnist. Rodale's comments do not necessarily reflect the thinking of the Lancaster Farming editor or anyone else on the Lancaster Farming staff.)

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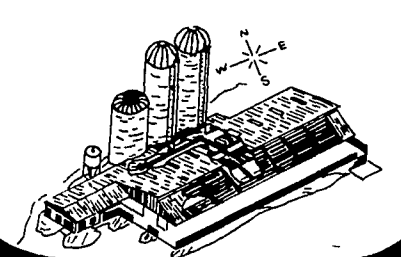
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