



Certified pedorthist Michelle McCrory assessed this Stan Smith sneaker and liked its design features, including a removable insert and lots of support. She wishes fashion shoes were equally well designed.

PHOTOGRAPHY • DECLAN OUTHIT

The painful truth

High heels strain the knees, hips and back, squash the toes and cause corns and calluses — but there's no need to sacrifice style for health

Michelle McCrory is breaking down my favourite white sneakers. They are my newest Stan Smiths, a brand introduced to me by my husband, who has worn Stans for more than 40 years.

The brand began as an athletic shoe named for tennis champion Stan Smith. Simple lines and classic design have made it iconic. Celebrities have collaborated with Adidas to put their spin on the look. It has



Lynn Haddrall

been the shoe of choice for designers on the runway and in daily life.

Last summer, I wore my Stans to work while recovering from a broken ankle. It's hard to rock a kitten heel while in a cast

and on crutches. I wore my sneakers with suits and cocktail dresses, starting great conversations among women looking for a stylish alternative to heels.

Wearing only flat shoes was liberating. After talking with certified pedorthist Michelle McCrory, I now understand it was also much healthier.

I wanted an expert's opinion on staying healthy with shoes that are stylish so I asked her to assess my Stans. She picked

up the shoe, twisted it, bent it, checked the tread, removed the liner and gave me two thumbs up for reasons that include:

1. **Firm** support behind the heel
2. **Reinforcement** between the sole and insole
3. **Proper** flex at the ball of the foot
4. **Torsional** stability (hard to "wring it out")
5. **Ability** to adjust for comfort, support and stability

McCrory, a former basketball star at the University of Waterloo, has been a certified pedorthist for 25 years.

She displays her footwear passion in her office at the Waterloo Sports Medicine Centre. A large painting of feet by co-worker Ann MacKenzie graces the wall. You can find a foot sculpture beside a piggy bank to fund new shoes. It's the space of someone keen to spread the word about taking care of our feet. McCrory spread that word all the way to Quito, Ecuador, voluntarily delivering 25 hockey bags of used footwear.

Spend a few minutes with this mother of two daughters and you may stop wearing heels, or choose them more wisely. She sees the damage that can result and is quick to cite scary statistics: women experience foot problems four times more often than men; nine out of 10 women wear shoes that are too small.

Sports shoes are designed to provide support, cushion and stability while enhancing movement and performance. Athletic footwear designers consider variables such as composition of the terrain, body angles, multidirectional movement and stress to ankles and knees.

"Modern fashion footwear takes none of this into account," McCrory says. "And so I choose, even for everyday wear, for the health of my feet, ankles and knees, to buy low heels, with a good heel counter (support) and a toe box, which fits the shape of my foot."

McCrory hasn't banished heels from her

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A foot sculpture sits next to certified pedorthist Michelle McCrory's 'shoe fund' bank. And yes, there is some change in the bank.

closet. When she buys them, she chooses wisely and limits her time standing. The highest heel she owns is two inches (five centimetres).

"Women tend to think of their feet as a certain size, but as you get older and have babies, your feet tend to spread, both in length and width. Few women remeasure their feet after age 20."

Women wear heels because they "exaggerate the particularly feminine aspects of gait," McCrory says.

"The female walk is perceived as much more attractive when wearing high heels. It accentuates the length of your legs, making them look longer and thinner and more fit, while also exaggerating your booty and your bosom. Heels add height to your stature."

But women risk major physical changes by placing their feet in high heels, especially in a pointy toe. Foot problems start appearing in 40-year-olds after decades of wearing shoes that fit poorly.

"They push the body weight forward onto the balls of the feet and often squash the toes together into a point, causing calluses and corns. When the body weight is pushed forward, it changes the way someone walks, which could have long-term detrimental effects."

Some women feel wearing a flat or

PROBLEMS ASSOCIATED WITH HIGH HEELS:

Feet: corns, calluses, bunions, Morton's neuroma, metatarsalgia, ingrown toenails, Haglund's deformity (pump bump)

Ankles/calves: instability causing falls (sprained ankles), tightened Achilles and shortened calf muscles

Knees: Knees absorb shocks. Wearing heels shifts the centre of gravity forward, which in turn increases the load and impact on the inside of knees

Hips/back: You are tilted forward and the spine must make compensations, such as hips thrusting forward and back arching

Bunions: High heels don't cause bunions but can aggravate them

Source: Michelle McCrory, Waterloo Sports Medicine Centre

lower heel condemns them to frump over fashion. That's just not true anymore. When celebrities and runway models sport Birkenstocks and sneakers with their designer duds, you know the heel is no longer the only stylish option.

Mary Reger, owner of Alexandria's Shoes for Women in Waterloo, sees many chic options for women who want to move away from heels.

"There is a huge shift in fashion toward the flat shoe. For some, it is a difficult transition to go from wearing a heel to

wearing a flat and we understand that," she says. "I personally love the look. It is a great option for women who walk to work or have foot issues. I hear every day from mature women who used to be able to wear a high heel but no longer can, so this fashion trend opens up a lot of options."

She points to popular styles this season such as brogues for the menswear look, as well as loafers and "uptown" sneakers. She walks the talk when it comes to flats. Reger loves to wear a nude patent brogue with ribbon laces. She sports them with jeans as well as a skirt.

McCrory spends a lot of time educating patients about appropriate footwear while considering their foot shape and limitations. Knowing women will continue to wear heels, she recommends limiting how often you wear them and choosing styles with the most comfort and safety.

"Shoes are like a container for your feet. You have to get the right-shaped container to match your foot shape. Most men's shoes are made to the exact same shape as their feet, whereas women's shoes almost never match the shape of the female foot. So if you squeeze your foot into such ill-fitting shoes often and long enough, they will eventually cause pain and discomfort."

McCrory suggests tracing an outline of your foot on a piece of paper and then tracing your stiletto. I did this. The difference is compelling.

When you shop for shoes, remember that the higher the heel, the bigger the impact, because the body needs to make a bigger adjustment to avoid falling forward.

"A one-inch heel is enough to tilt the body forward 10 degrees. A rigid body would topple over and fall forward. When you wear shoes with a heel two inches or higher, your foot slides forward in your shoe, forcing the toes into the unnatural shape of the shoe and redistributing your weight incorrectly," McCrory explains.

"The increased weight on your toes

causes your body to tilt forward, and to compensate you must keep your knees bent, lean backwards and overarch your back, creating a posture that can strain your knees, hips and lower back.

"Over time, wearing high heels can shorten the muscles in your calves and in your back, leading to pain and muscle spasms. So in order to maintain balance, compensations are made at the foot, ankle, knee, hip and back. The body must compensate to hold you upright."

McCrory cautions that choosing flip-flops to escape heels is a poor choice for most occasions.

"These cheap, easy to slip on, fashionable summer shoes do more harm than good," she says. "Flips definitely have a role as part of the shoes we choose to wear during our nice weather months. The problem arises when these flips become your go-to sandal of choice for other activities and functions. Flip-flops are not designed to give you enough protection, support, cushion, function or comfort. They are best in public showers, at the beach or poolside."

If you're looking to get the best shoe, you should consider the time of day you shop. McCrory suggests trying on shoes late in the afternoon to ensure the most comfortable fit. Your feet can be different sizes at different times and they swell after walking. Shoes need to fit your expanded feet.

"It's unlikely your feet will swell a full size, but if you're on the verge of a size, this could be the difference between comfortable shoes and shoes that make your feet feel pinched," she says. If you must shop in the morning, don't buy snug shoes.

Summer is a perfect time to experiment and try lower heels or flats. There are many fresh designs and choices. I'm sticking with the chic minimalism of my Stans, especially after receiving the McCrory seal of approval. ☺



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