Looks that kill

Shoes, bags, and even undies that can hurt your health

Fashion victims, listen up! Oversized bags, skinny jeans, 4-inch heels, and other trends can be dangerous to your health, not just your bank account. Here are eight fashion dos that can be health don'ts, and what to do about them.

Boa-constrictor jeans and body shapers

THE RISK Snug-fitting pants and girdle-like undergarments can damage pelvic nerves, causing painful burning and tingling sensations in the thighs, says Orly Avitzur, M.D., a board-certified neurologist and medical adviser to Consumer Reports, the publisher of ShopSmart. Other potential side effects from constrictive clothing include bladder infections, vaginal yeast infections, contact dermatitis, and even blood clots in the legs. And as anyone who has dared to eat a meal in skintight pants can attest, they can interfere with bowel motility and cause abdominal pain. Men who wear tight pants risk genital heat stress and fertility problems.

THE FIX If you love the look, go for slim-fitting jeans that kiss your curves rather than crushing them. If you must, buy them a size or two larger and pair them with a trendy tunic or a flowy shirt and jacket. Save body shapers for special occasions and choose a style and size that allows you to breathe and move more freely.

Stringy underwear

THE RISK Thongs prevent panty lines by daring to go where no underwear has gone before. But that's also why they made our list of health hazards. "Snug-fitting thongs rub against the vaginal area and can eventually lead to an itchy, uncomfortable buildup of skin called hyperkeratosis," says Susan Hoffstetter, Ph.D., a women's-health nurse practitioner and assistant professor of obstetrics, gynecology, and women's health at St. Louis University School of Medicine. Thongs also provide the perfect vehicle to transport fecal bacteria to the urethra and cause painful urinary tract infections.

THE FIX While it's probably OK to wear a thong now and then, you should choose a more conventional style for everyday, Hoffstetter says. What to do about panty lines? "In our office we're a big fan of boy shorts," she says.

Flat, floppy footwear

THE RISK "The biggest problem with most flip-flops is that they lack support and stability," says Jane Andersen, D.P.M, a podiatrist practicing in Chapel Hill, N.C., and past president of the American Association for Women Podiatrists, who has seen cases of plantar fasciitis, or heel pain, rise along with the footwear's popularity. "Not to mention twisted ankles and broken toes from people who thought they could play Frisbee in them or move furniture." In addition, heels that are constantly exposed and allowed to flatten out often become callous and cracked.

THE FIX To keep feet looking and feeling better, alternate floppy and flat shoes with more supportive, closed-heel styles. If you want to get really serious about it, look for styles that carry the American Podiatric Medical Association's seal of acceptance (go to *www.apma.org* for the list). APMA-accepted brands have features like shock-absorbing soles, arch supports, and a padded toe separator. You'll pay extra, but you'll have happier feet.

BILL BROWN

High-rise heels

THE RISK Researchers at the University of California at Los Angeles recently examined the shoes and feet of 356 women and found that 90 percent of the women wore shoes that were too narrow for their feet. Eighty percent had foot pain. In 70 percent, ill-fitting shoes helped to create more than one foot deformity, such as bunions and hammer toes, and created pinched nerves, heel pain (plantar fasciitis), calluses, or ingrown toenails. You can blame a lot of that pain on high heels. "The problem with heels is that they shift weight to the front of the foot, causing a host of problems in that area," Andersen says. Other shoes such as sandals that lack support and structure can cause more pain in the back part of the foot than

other shoes, according to a recent study. In addition, long-time heel wearers can suffer from a shortening of the muscles and tendon in the back of the calf, making flats—even sneakers—no longer comfortable.

THE FIX No, you don't have to trade your pumps for Birkenstocks. "There are several ways to make heels more palatable," Anderson says. For everyday wear, look for shoes made of soft leather, with a rounded toe box and a heel height of 2 inches or less. Wider heels and wedge styles distribute weight better than pointy heels. And remember to alternate wearing heels with flats. As for those *gorgeous* Manolo Blahnik stilettos, Anderson advises that you "treat them as you would dessert and indulge only occasionally." Kick them off under the dinner table and in the car, and switch to flats when you can.

Earsplitting earrings

THE RISK Big, dangling earrings can damage your earlobe. Even Avitzur found herself needing surgical repair of a split ear-piercing because she, in her words, "sacrificed my better judgment for the sake of fashion."

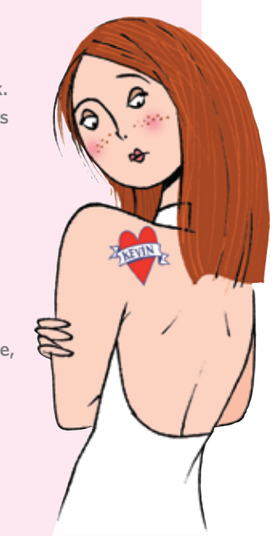
THE FIX To avoid disfiguring your lobes, don't wear heavy earrings for long periods and remove dangling earrings when you're styling your hair, close to a small child, or using the phone (your phone ear is most likely to develop elongated piercing holes due to the pressue). If the baby yanks out your earring or the lobe tears due to some other trauma,

The trouble with tats

One big problem with tattoos is that there's no good data on the safety of injectable inks. The Food and Drug Administration is researching tattoo inks, but none is now approved for injection into the skin. In fact, many ink pigments are industrial-strength colors suitable for printer's ink or auto paint. These pigments are illegal in cosmetics in Europe because they can break down into cancer-causing compounds.

What's more, your immune system views tattoos as an invader, which is why traces of ink can wind up in your lymph nodes and why some folks develop granulomas, small knots or bumps that form around the particles of tattoo ink. Other complications include allergic reactions and infection from dirty needles or unsterile ink. Outbreaks of methicillin-resistant staphylococcus aureus (MRSA) infections have been linked to tattoos and the risk of developing hepatitis C is twice as high for the tattooed as it is for intravenous drug users.

And tattoo removal is difficult; it can cost hundreds of dollars or more and leave scars. According to a 2008 report in the Archives of Dermatology, many women have tattoo remorse, citing feelings of embarrassment, negative comments, and fashion concerns. The new Freedom-2 inks are easier than India ink to remove with a laser, but again, their long-term safety is unknown.



seek immediate medical attention. Otherwise, the earlobe might deform as the torn edges heal.

Fake nails

THE RISK Problem 1 with acrylic salon nails is that they provide the perfect breeding ground for bacteria. Infections under and around the fake nail can be severe, painful, and difficult to treat. Problem 2 is that some people are allergic to the glue used to apply the nails. Methacrylate-free glues are less allergenic but may cause the underlying nail to peel and crack. Problem 3 is that while you wear artificial nails, your real nails can become thin, dry, and brittle. Acrylic nails are hard to remove and, once you do get rid of them, it can take up to eight months for your own nails to grow out healthy and strong.

THE FIX You can minimize the risk of infection by buying a pack of disposable manicure instruments at the salon or bringing your own. If your salon reuses instruments, make sure that you see nail technicians put them in an autoclave, a closed metal box designed just for sterilizing

equipment. There really isn't anything you can do to avoid the risk of allergic reactions or ruining your natural nails. The best solution is to go natural. Your own nails can look quite lovely if you keep them filed, buffed, and moisturized. (Check out our do-it-yourself guide on page 11.) If you want the perfect look of artificial nails for a special occasion, try the drugstore variety. They've come a long way and are relatively easy to use.

Humongous handbags

THE RISK Giant designer bags might be convenient places to stash a wallet, laptop, water bottle, book, lunch, cosmetics, and maybe even a well-behaved pooch. But schlepping all that stuff can really take a huge toll on your back, neck, and shoulders. "Carrying a heavy purse day after day changes the biomechanics of the body," says Avitzur. "I see a lot of people in pain because of it."

THE FIX A smaller purse is a good first step. "Throw everything on the bed and see what you really need and what you can live without," Avitzur recommends. Also, when shopping for a purse, look for wider straps or multiple skinny straps that won't cut into your shoulders, and consider wearing it across your chest to balance the weight.

But if you're already suffering from neck or back pain, you might want to consider an extreme measure—yes, the dreaded fanny pack. "It limits the amount you can carry and distributes the weight across your waist and hips rather than the shoulder," Avitzur says. Even if you're not ready to go the '80s route every day, it's a good solution for extended forays in the jungle, urban or otherwise.

Can't let go of the big bag? Use it just for transport—to and from the office, for example, or on a weekend trip—and load it with a small bag that you can carry pain-free.

Unsupportive bras

THE RISK Research suggests that most women are wearing the wrong-size bra. In a recent Australian study, 70 percent of subjects studied were wearing bras that were too small according to standardized fitting guidelines; another 10 percent were wearing bras that were too large. Bra fit is particularly a problem for women with larger breasts. A study of 102 women referred for possible breast-reduction surgery found that not a single one was wearing a correctly sized bra.

How a bra is engineered matters as well. "If a bra is unsupportive, it puts all the weight of the breast on the shoulder straps, which throws the neck out of alignment and puts stress on the sensitive nerves under the collarbone," says Christina Lasich, M.D., a physical medicine and rehabilitation specialist and author of "High Heels to Hormones: A Woman's Guide to Spine Care" (iUniverse, 2008). That causes pain in the neck and shoulders and can lead to thoracic outlet syndrome, a condition involving pain and tingling in the arms and a weak grip. Spaghetti straps can cause similar problems.

THE FIX If you've got large breasts, stay away from skimpy, unsupportive bras with thin straps. According to Lasich, it's worth going to a good lingerie shop or department store with a bra specialist for a fitting at least once. "Finding the style and size bra that fits you properly can make a huge difference in your life," Lasich says. (See the box at right for tips on getting a bra that really fits.)

How to get the right fit

SHOES

- **Shop at the right time.** Your feet swell as the day goes on, so it's best to go shoe shopping later in the p.m. hours, when your feet are larger.
- **Watch out for killer shoes.** You want shoes that bend at the ball of the foot but are not so floppy that they fold in half. Closed-heel shoes should cup the back of your foot firmly. Look for heeled shoes with a suede footbed to keep your feet from sliding forward. Or add your own insert, such as the APMA-recommended Insolia inserts.
- **Find the right fit.** Sizes vary widely from brand to brand, so don't hesitate to try different lengths and widths. Fit to your largest foot (most people have a foot that is larger than the other) and leave a thumb tip's distance between the end of your longest toe to the tip of the shoe. Shoes should feel good from the second you put them on; there's no such thing as a break-in period.

BRAS

- **Size it right** If you've worn the same size bra for years, it's time for a recheck. Start by putting on your most comfortable bra, but not a minimizer or one with extra padding.

Step 1: Measure under your arms, high on your back, across your chest. That is your band size. If it's an odd number, add 1 inch.

Step 2: Measure loosely around the fullest part of your bust. Subtract that measurement from your band size to find your cup size: 1 inch difference is an A cup; 2 inches, a B; 3 inches, a C; 4 inches, a D; and so on.

A bra is too small if your bust bulges over the top or at the underarms, the band cuts into your back, or the center front of the bra sits away from the body.

A bra is too large if the cup is wrinkled, the shoulder straps slip, the back of the bra rides up, or the cups sit high at the underarm.

Heavy metal

And you thought stilettos and skinny jeans were a pain!

Today's fashion trends are cushy compared with some of the stuff women wore during the 1800s. Undergarments could be dangerously constricting, says Vivien Rose, Ph.D., chief of cultural resources at the Women's Rights National Historic Park and co-creator of an exhibition there called "Fashioning an Image." Some of these commonly worn pieces look like they could give you puncture wounds if you weren't careful.

Corsets cinched the waist to as little as 17 inches, to give women an hourglass figure. They were commonly stiffened with whale bones or metal rods.

Crinolines gave skirts a hoop shape and were often made of rigid metal concentric circles that resembled a cage. They could be as large as 6 feet in diameter.

Bustles created a large bulge at the back of a skirt or dress. Early versions were made from pillows and tape, which were later replaced by metal wires and rods.

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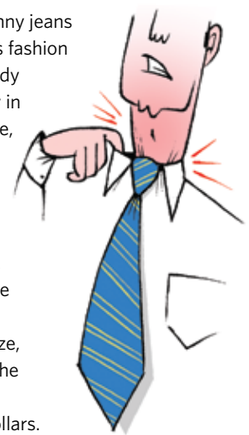
MEN CAN BE FASHION VICTIMS TOO

Yes, some guys are torturing themselves with skinny jeans just like us. Beyond that, the only unhealthy men's fashion item we could come up with was ties. A small study published in the British Journal of Ophthalmology in 2003 found that tight ties could raise eye pressure, perhaps leading to a misdiagnosis of glaucoma. The authors theorized that over time, tight ties might even increase a man's risk of developing the disease. Kenneth Miller, a manager at the high-end men's store Capra and Cavelli in Austin, Texas, blames shirt collars. "A lot of men may have worn a 15½-inch collar in school but don't realize that they're a 17 now," he says. To find the right size, measure around the base of the neck just below the Adam's apple, leaving a fingertip's width. When laundering shirts, skip starch, which can shrink collars.