Every year, it seems, another study reconfirms what practitioners already know: High heeled shoe wear alters biomechanics over time in undeniable, painful ways. But practitioners also know that asking women to give up their heels is an exercise in futility. Instead, the focus is on finding a balance. This is evident by a quote of a woman saying: “My feet may be in hell, but from the ankles up I look like heaven.”

High-heeled shoes (2 in/5 cm or higher) are worn by 57% to 62% of women and have been linked to the development of foot pain. Some of the problems that may develop typically associate with excessive high heel wear include neuromas, hammer- and claw toes, bunions, chronic forefoot pain (ball of foot), stress fractures, and bone spurs.

The deforming force increases with the height of the heel. A three-inch heel puts on seven times the force that a one-inch heel does on the forefoot. The fat pad under the metatarsal heads gets anteriorly displaced, and corns and calluses with pain are some of the body’s responses to the resulting pressure.

The question for us clinicians then becomes not how to get them to give up the shoes (Let’s face it; they won’t), but how to contain the damage. Here are some tips that may help:

It’s important that high heels have a back—and not just a sling back. With most of the weight on the front, your toes have the extra job of gripping the shoe so it doesn’t go flying off.

Start with some simple daily exercises to strengthen the foot’s small intrinsic muscles. One involves picking up a towel with your toes.

Limit the time you wear high heel shoes. Wear other shoes when commuting, especially if walking is involved, and keep the high heel shoes for work.

Sometimes surgery is the answer when foot deformities are present and need correcting, and other conservative methods failed to relieve the symptoms. Newer, less invasive techniques are available as well. These involve the use of collagen and other plastic surgery DermaFillers which can be safely injected into the areas of pain under local anesthesia without incisions. Relief can be obtained for 6-12 months depending on the specific product used. Although conservative options are available such as custom orthotics with metatarsal pads, these are impractical for extremely stylish shoes. If you must wear Jimmy Choo, Christian Louboutin and Manolo Blahnik, to name a few, you may be a candidate for these innovative procedures.