

## IF THE SHOE DOESN'T FIT...

**THE TRUTH ABOUT COSMETIC FOOT SURGERY  
BY SHANDLEY MCMURRAY**

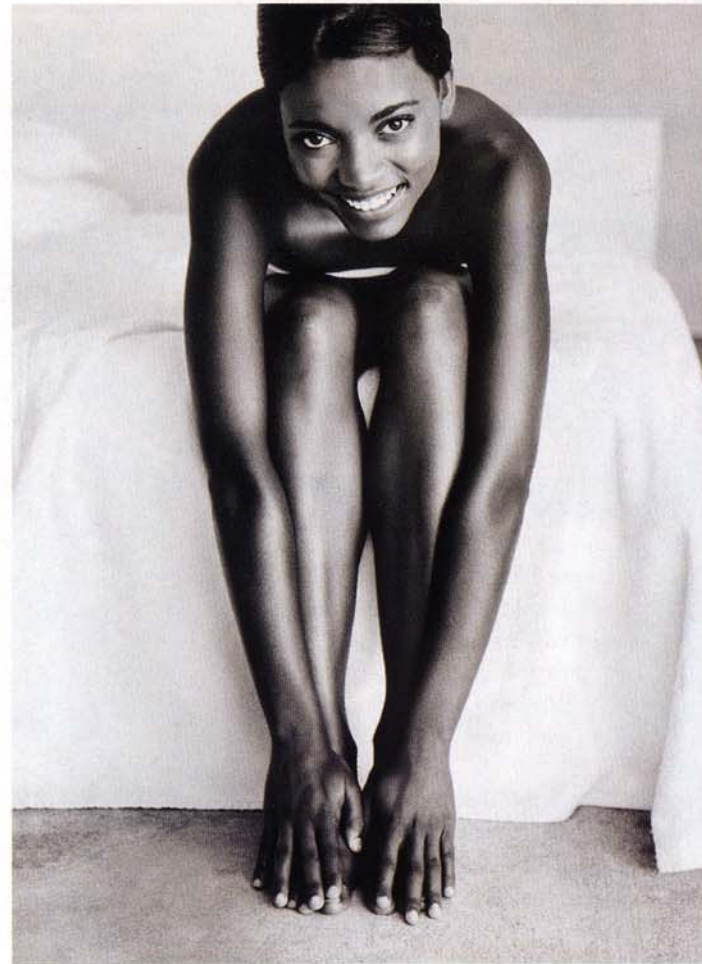
We lift our faces to look younger, we enlarge our breasts for sex appeal and now we're lopping off parts of our feet for better "toe cleavage." Wait a minute, isn't that taking things a bit too far?

According to a 1991 study, close to 90 per cent of women wear shoes that are too tight for their feet. As a result, they experience painful and unsightly bunions, swollen toe joints and hammer toes. The American Orthopaedic Foot and Ankle Society (AOFAS) says wearing high heels can also cause knee, pelvic, back and shoulder pain. It's no surprise that 80 per cent of foot surgeries are performed on the fairer sex. The obvious cure would be to toss the heels in favour of more comfortable shoes, but many fashionistas won't even contemplate that option. They'd rather put themselves under the knife than give up their Manolo Blahniks or Jimmy Choos.

But the truth is, few surgeons are willing to operate on a perfectly healthy foot. Dr. Wayne Carman, director of Toronto's Cosmetic Surgery Institute, says pain, not a desire to fit into a Prada shoe, is the major criteria for surgery. Plus, he says, most women come to see him because of discomfort. "The ability to wear better-looking shoes is not usually why people go to somebody to have their foot fixed," he says. "They're more likely to go because it hurts."

The thought that podiatrists are running around chopping off parts of a healthy foot is ridiculous, he says. "Nobody who does a lot of foot surgery is going to do anything drastic to a foot just for appearance." The foot is a complex combination of bones, joints, ligaments, muscles and arches, making the risks of surgery far too great, he says. If you narrow the foot or reduce it in any major way, the patient could develop significant structural problems. Plus, the surgery could worsen any existing conditions to the extent that the patient couldn't walk without pain.

Even Alexandra\*, a 30-year-old graphic designer who absolutely hated her feet wouldn't have undergone surgery for the sole purpose of improving their appearance. Alexandra had a congenital deformity called brachymetatarsia, which caused her fourth toes to be abnormally short. Her feet were so unattractive, she says, that she felt embarrassed by them for years. She would even bury them in sand at the beach to avoid exposing them. Two years ago, she began experiencing pain in the balls of her feet, which prompted her to get them fixed. "Just fitting into a nice pair of Prada sandals is one thing," she says. "That wasn't my objective. I had something congenitally wrong with me."



**THERE ARE SOME WOMEN WHO HATE THE APPEARANCE OF THEIR FEET SO MUCH THAT THEY'LL DO ANYTHING TO HIDE THEM.**

After two extremely painful procedures to lengthen her bones and about six months on crutches, Alexandra is finally happy with the way her feet look. "I look at them and think, this is amazing," she says. "But I wouldn't recommend it for a lot of people because you really have to cope with a lot."

Dr. Robert Chelin, Alexandra's podiatrist and a Fellow of the American Academy of Foot and Ankle Surgery, agrees. He, too, doesn't like to operate unless there's a legitimate reason to do so. But, he also believes that pain doesn't have to be physical. Psychological pain can be just as damaging, he says.

Whether it's because they're in chronic pain, can't fit into a normal shoe or are self-conscious about an abnormality, Chelin believes there are patients out there who need surgery. There are some women who hate the appearance of their feet so much that they'll do anything to hide them. They come to see him because they want their feet to look beautiful. "And there's nothing wrong with a pair of beautiful feet," he says. "If the surgery will make them feel better about themselves and allow them to wear what they desire, then I will consider it." Someone with a perfect-looking foot that functions well will not qualify for an operation.

So why are more women asking for cosmetic foot surgery when the risks are so great? Because their feet are in pain from damage caused by their shoes. If you look through the ages, Chelin says,

footwear has been an obvious evildoer for foot problems. Just take Chinese foot binding for example. "I can advise people all day to wear comfortable shoes," he says. "But they will do what they want. Certainly the pointy stuff we see today is not the most congenial for the shape of the foot. I think we know that."

If the risk of pain, infection and deformity aren't enough to convince you to avoid unnecessary foot surgery, perhaps the cost will help change your mind. Toe straightening and shortening runs between \$750 and \$1,000 per toe. And a bunion correction can cost anywhere between \$2,000 and \$2,500 per foot. The moral of the story: if it ain't broke, don't fix it. If you have a healthy foot, we suggest Uggs instead of Manolo Blahniks.

**Editorial Sources:**

- Dr. Wayne Carman, *Cosmetic Surgery Institute*, 416-322-7108.
- Dr. Robert Chelin, 416-921-5300.

## LEG-LENGTHENING—THE LONG AND SHORT OF IT

Wish you could be a few inches or even a foot taller? Are you ready to have your legs broken and encased in metal scaffolding for months to achieve it? And are you willing to fork out up to US\$80,000 for the procedure? You'd be surprised at how many people say yes.

Most commonly used to correct a child's abnormally short leg, leg-lengthening procedures are becoming increasingly popular with adults, especially in China. According to research, the vertically challenged everywhere are less likely to be awarded a high-paying job, receive a promotion or find a partner.

**WHAT'S INVOLVED?**

First, your legs are broken above and below the knee and stretched on a rack. Then, giant pins and screws are punched through your ankle and calf into a steel cage around your leg. When the bones begin to heal, you have to turn each of the screws about a 0.25 mm four

times a day to help stretch your legs.

**IS THE PROCEDURE WORTH IT?**

The majority of professionals would say no. Not only is the initial surgery extremely painful, but it takes several months to a year to achieve the desired length and appropriate healing. When the bones have finally healed, the patient has to undergo one more surgery to remove the pins. The end result is about two to three inches of additional length.

**WHAT ARE THE RISKS?**

If the procedure goes wrong, you could be left with misshapen bones, circulatory, muscular or nerve damage. If the bones are stretched too rapidly, they won't grow strong enough to support your weight. And, if they don't heal properly, they could break at the slightest knock. If chronic infection develops, which is likely because of the placement of the pins through the skin, the result could be amputation. —SM

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