

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers visit <https://www.djreprints.com>.

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-future-of-high-heels-looks-wobblyat-least-for-now-11618321500>

FASHION

The Future of High Heels Looks Wobbly—at Least for Now

Some women who ditched their high-heeled shoes during the pandemic have no plans to go back. Others are dipping their toes in slowly

By [Ray A. Smith](#)

April 13, 2021 9:45 am ET



Listen to this article

6 minutes

Najay Roache, a 34-year-old who works in government affairs in New York City, recently went to her closet to try on her Vince Camuto pumps with four-inch heels for the first time in a year.

“I was doing like a saunter step, trying to be cute, and I fell forward,” she says. “It was a huge, messy dramatic fall.”

As vaccines roll out and society emerges from quarantines, many women contemplating returning to offices, restaurants and social events are taking a new look at their long-unused high-heeled shoes. Some are dreading or altogether rejecting the idea of going back to pumps after months in house shoes, sneakers and flats. Others can’t wait to get dressed up again and wear their favorite heels, discomfort be damned.



Najay Roache recently tried on her heels for the first time in a year.

PHOTO: NAJAY ROACHE

Sales of high-heeled shoes fell 45% in 2020, according to market researcher NPD Group, as women had nowhere to wear them. Beth Goldstein, the firm's industry analyst for accessories and footwear, predicts sales will rise this year, but only modestly, as more women, feeling liberated from the tyranny of heels, stick with more comfortable footwear.

Many women had already been moving away from heels pre-Covid with the growing casual-fashion trend. The pandemic accelerated that shift. Brands famous for stilettos and pumps, such as Christian Louboutin and Stuart Weitzman, have been promoting more flats, loafers, sandals and sneakers on their Instagram accounts.

Men, too, are looking at going back to work shoes, but men's dress footwear has generally been many steps ahead of women's in comfort and cushioning technology.

The forced pause on dressing up put a spotlight on women's complicated relationship with heels and other restrictive clothing. Some have been grateful for the respite from high heels yet also miss them, says Marjorie Jolles, a professor of women's and gender studies at Roosevelt University. "Women feel enabled by heels," she says, referring to the sense of empowerment, polish and confidence some women say heels provide.

But for some, the pandemic may mark the end of wearing high heels. In March, on her way to meet a friend at a local winery in Columbus, Ohio, Joia Mercedes almost immediately began regretting her decision to wear a pair of new high heels. It marked the first time Ms. Mercedes, a flight attendant, had worn heels since January 2020. "My ankles were like, 'No, this isn't the life for me anymore,' " she says.

During the pandemic, Ms. Mercedes's many pairs of heels sat in her garage as she gravitated to flip flops, sandals and boots. Quarantining and the recent incident have shown her she can live without heels, she says. "I'm definitely comfort over cute right now. I think I'll be wearing some flats for the rest of 2021."

Others, like Sarah Hancotte, a 42-year-old information-technology project manager in the Phoenix area, won't give up on heels but she does plan to wear them less often. After recently walking in a parking lot in heels for the first time since the pandemic began—likening it to "navigating an 'American Ninja Warrior' course"—she says she has decided her plan is to "be more intentional" in choosing outfits that pair well with flats, so she doesn't need to wear heels all the time.

The first walk in heels after a year has prompted other women to consider re-entering slowly before stepping up to higher styles. Meghan Moore, a 45-year-old marketing executive in Philadelphia, wore a pair of four-inch heels in December for the first time since lockdowns and compared her look on the cobblestone streets to "walking like a baby giraffe." She held on to her husband to keep from falling. Her plan is to work her way up,

“starting with flats then go to a kitten heel and then higher. It’s going to be like training wheels for stilettos.”



Meghan Moore likened her first outing in heels since Covid lockdowns to ‘walking like a baby giraffe.’

PHOTO: MEGHAN MOORE

Podiatrists have been advising those patients who want to return to high heels to take baby steps, starting with lower styles then graduating or doing foot-muscle exercises to brace themselves for venturing out in heels again. “Some of the exercises will include writing the letters of the alphabet with your toes, or maybe picking up a towel with your toes,” says New York-based podiatrist Suzanne Levine. She also recommends working on glutes and abdominal muscles to prepare for heels and help improve balance.

Though sales of high heels overall fell in 2020, younger women in particular kept buying them in anticipation of the days when they could dress up again, says Alexis DeSalva Kahler, senior analyst of retail and e-commerce at market researcher Mintel. A January 2021 Mintel survey of 2,000 adults found that 35% of women ages 18 to 34 made online purchases of dress shoes, including heels, in the last 12 months, compared with less than 25% for women age 35 and above.



Amanda Greene bought new heels online during the pandemic, in anticipation of dressing up again.

PHOTO: AMANDA GREENE

Amanda Greene is one of those shoppers. The 31-year-old middle-school band teacher in Columbia, S.C., bought six pairs of heels online while quarantining, and wore one pair in late March when she attended a funeral outdoors. It was her first time in heels in a year, and for a couple of days after, her calves hurt. “I have to figure out what’s the best means

of getting myself used to wearing them because I have too many pairs to just stop wearing them altogether,” she says.

As soon as Kristen Marelli, a 38-year-old investment analyst in Austin, became eligible to get the Covid-19 vaccine in March, she started wearing a new pair of four-inch high heels around the house to break them in and prepare herself for the eventual return to her office. Ms. Marelli, who before the pandemic wore heels almost every day to work, says she has been struck by how much the back-to-work heels she splurged on hurt so far and wonders if her feet have changed.

Still, she says she’ll keep practicing. “We’re not going back until June so this gives me plenty of time.”

Write to Ray A. Smith at ray.smith@wsj.com

MORE ON FASHION

[Skinny Jeans and 9 Other Styles That Date You](#) April 10, 2021

[The Secrets of a Perfect Capsule Wardrobe](#) April 8, 2021

[Corsets Are Back, Thanks to ‘Bridgerton’ and Party Fever](#) April 3, 2021

[Bespoke...Jeans? Why Custom-Made Casual Menswear Is a Deal](#) April 1, 2021

[Stella McCartney, Michael Kors, Tory Burch and More on Getting Inspired by Nature](#) March 27, 2021

Copyright © 2021 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers visit <https://www.djreprints.com>.