

Kurt Geiger's highest heels for winter 2010-11 are a precarious 14cm (5 ½"), retailing for about £140. For the spring-summer 2011 collection, 1970s-inspired wedge shoes will have heels up to 16cm (6 ¼"). Each additional centimetre in heel height increases price by 20%.

CREDIT: KURT GEIGER



The height of fashion

Fashion experts predicted that 2010 would be the year of the 'midi-heel'; modest, sensible shoes that were not just stylish but comfortable too. But in a surge of celebrity-obsessed fashion culture, sales of high heels have rocketed internationally after being worn by pop stars such as Lady Gaga and Rihanna.

Designer shoe retailer Kurt Geiger announced recently that sales of its highest heeled shoes quadrupled during 2010. Compared with 2009, like for like sales increased by 30%, according to chief executive of Kurt Geiger, Neil Clifford – with many of the best-selling shoes having a heel of 12cm or higher. The UK-based group, whose dizzying heels have become very popular among the rich and famous, has put the surge in sales down to a huge interest in celebrity fashion.

"Shoes are better than underwear at transforming the shape of your body and the higher the heel the bigger the impact," said creative director Rebecca Farrar-Hockley. "The Kurt Geiger fashionistas want to replicate the look of their favourite celebrities and models and if one of our shoes is seen on a television show then there is an immediate surge in sales."

Reports that sales of skyscraper heels have quadrupled for one UK retailer confirm what history has been telling us all along: high heels are high fashion.

The trend has also been noted at London department store Selfridges, where sales of the most expensive and exceptionally high party shoes, Christian Louboutin's Bridget's Back ankle bootie – retailing for £2,325 – surged after being worn by Kylie Minogue on television talent show The X Factor. The silver leather studded and encrusted shoe boasts a 17.8cm (7") heel and flew out of the store following the singer's performance. A spokesperson for Selfridges said: "High heels will always prevail as the ultimate party shoe, and this season is no exception."

In 2009 the late fashion designer Alexander McQueen famously sent his models down the catwalk wearing 25.4cm stilettos. But three runway models were cut from the show for refusing to wear the 'Armadillo' heels.

Sales of high heels have rocketed internationally after being worn by pop stars such as Rihanna.

CREDIT: SHUTTERSTOCK



“...as a matter of interest...”

Although shoe height now implies status and wealth, the original inspiration for high heels might well have had more to do with weather and street conditions. In Medieval times, men and women attached wooden soles, or ‘pattens’ to their shoes to keep them out of the mud and other street debris when walking outdoors.

The entire shoe was elevated as a ‘chopine’, a type of platform shoe, which originated in its modern form in Turkey circa 1400. The shoes were effectively miniature stilts made of cork and covered with leather or fabric. Chopines were typically 18-20cm high, but could be as tall as 46cm, and were worn to keep the wearer's skirt out of the mud. When the style became fashionable in 16th century Venice, chopine-shod ladies walked with a servant on either side of them so they wouldn't fall.

Catherine de Medici (1519-1589) is credited with wearing the first true high heels and bringing the style to France in 1533 when she married the Duc d'Orleans, who would become France's King Henry II. Italian designers created the high heel by modifying the chopine; a cork wedge was placed under the front of the shoe, with a high section under the heel. The resulting shoe made feet appear smaller and the arch of the foot higher; both attributes were considered signs of noble birth.

The French Revolution put a temporary stop to the growing trend for high heels, but their popularity grew again after World War II. Stiletto heels, with spiked heels which narrow to pinpoints, soared into fashion in the 1950s. Throughout the last 60 years, footwear designers have created everything from block heels to kitten heels (typically a much lower heel) and wedge heels, where the heel continues all the way to the toe of the shoe. As previously reported in *World Footwear*, luxury jewellery brand House of Borgezie recently created a high-heeled shoe made almost entirely from gold and diamonds which it aims to retail for £100,000 per pair. Now that's what we call sky high fashion!



The Eternal Borgezie Diamond Stiletto is handcrafted by a goldsmith before being adorned with more than 2,000 diamonds.

CREDIT: SIMON WINNALL/
HOUSE OF BORGEZIE



According to high-fashion brands such as Jimmy Choo, a 'low heel' is considered less than 6cm, while heels between 6cm and 8.5cm are considered 'mid heels', and anything over that is classed as a 'high heel'.

CREDIT: JIMMY CHOO

Perhaps they were worried about the impact the shoes might have on their health. High heels can cause long-term damage to feet and have been shown to cause such ailments as bunions, back and knee pain and osteoarthritis. Many of these problems are caused by the increased pressure high heels put on the ball of the foot. And the higher the heel, the greater the pressure, a fact that will surely make consumers think twice before following in their celebrity idols' wobbly footsteps.

It seems that for those buying high heeled shoes, however, the desire to be fashionable outweighs the health risks posed. A recent survey by shoe insert firm Insolia revealed that the average woman is able to wear high heels for only 34 minutes before experiencing crippling pain. Yet half of those questioned said they own a pair of high heels which hurt to wear but which they put up with because they look good. Insolia podiatrist Erika Gibbins said of the findings: "So many women will be able to relate to these findings as they have been victims of painful shoes, but persevere in the name of fashion." 