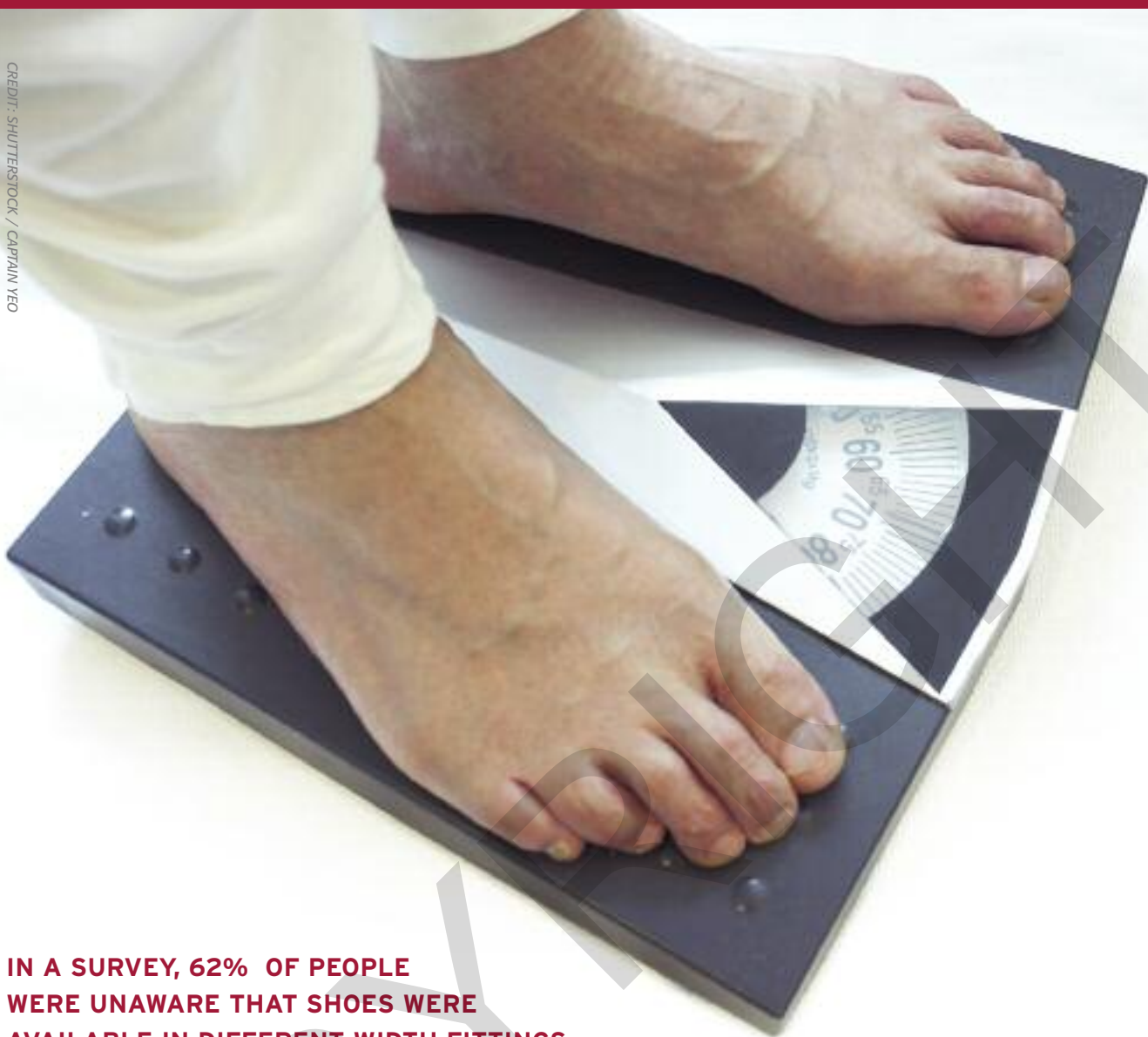




IN A SURVEY, 62% OF PEOPLE WERE UNAWARE THAT SHOES WERE AVAILABLE IN DIFFERENT WIDTH FITTINGS.

Who's to blame?

According to the UK College of Podiatry, British feet have become substantially larger since 1970 as the population has become both taller and heavier. It also says that both men and women admit to wearing shoes that are too small and too narrow. And we wonder why the incidence of foot problems in later life is also on the increase! The College believes this may be due to a combination of things including a lack of understanding of shoe sizes and width fittings and not having shoes professionally fitted. Even more disturbing is that many people knowingly buy the wrong size because of fashion or if the price has been reduced in a sale.

The research, which was commissioned to mark foot health awareness campaign Feet for Life month earlier this year, showed that the average shoe size in the UK has increased by around two sizes since the 1970s. The average man in the UK now wears a size ten (EU45) compared to a size eight shoe (EU42) 40 years ago and the average woman a size six (EU39) as against a size four (EU37).

Of those surveyed, 26% of men and 41% of women said their feet had changed in size as an adult, with 48% of men saying they had become bigger and 61% saying they were wider; 35% of women reported an increase in size with 68% saying they were wider. Both sexes attributed this to putting on weight (41%) and getting older (55%). Nevertheless, 34% of men and 46% of women admitted to buying shoes that did not fit, with 44% likely to buy shoes that were too small as against 24% that were too large, or nearly double.

BUYING THE WRONG SIZE

When asked why they had bought shoes that didn't fit properly, the main reasons given were as follows: 35% said they thought they were the right size but then found them uncomfortable in wear, 27% liked them but the shop did not have them in their size, 26% bought them online and didn't realise they would not fit, 19% as they were in a sale and 15% because they did not have time to try them on in

the shop. When asked what problems they faced when buying footwear, 20% said they had difficulty in finding shoes big enough and 51% found it difficult to find comfortable ones they thought fashionable.

The survey also suggested that people may not even know what size shoe they should be wearing, with 17% admitting to never having had their feet measured even as a child and the majority of others since their early teens. Astonishingly, a further 62% were not even aware that in addition to standard length sizes, it was also possible to buy shoes in different width fittings. With so many wearing shoes that do not fit, it is hardly surprising that nearly 29% of women and 18% of men also said they regularly suffered from sore and aching feet. Furthermore, nearly a third of both sexes admitted to keeping and wearing shoes even though they did not fit.

WHY DO THIS?

It is hard to believe that, despite all the information that is readily available in the UK concerning foot health, so many people appear to be either totally ignorant of how to choose a pair of shoes that fit, or does know and yet chooses to ignore it. Even worse, so many knowingly continue to wear badly fitting shoes despite having to endure constant discomfort. Are all consumers like this or is the UK an exception? One can only hope that it is.

One reason for this phenomenon may be human psychology. Is it a case of self denial of having bigger feet in the case of women in the same way that they will often do their utmost to squeeze into clothes that are too small – vanity? That would not seem a plausible excuse for men, however, who on the whole prefer to be big rather than small. So is it just laziness in their case? Whatever the reason these people are knowingly causing themselves severe discomfort now and potential future long term harm. Another example of the illogical nature of the human psyche?

AVAILABILITY

Manufacturers have been aware of a steady increase in foot size for many years and have adjusted their

size ranges accordingly. Many now also include more extreme sizes while on higher price point products a range of fittings is usually available. So, from that point of view, manufacturers would appear to be doing their best to cater for this increase in foot size; it is in their own commercial interest to do so.

If the shoes are available from manufacturers, there is no reason for retailers not to stock them; if the demand is there—which it apparently is—it is again clearly in their own interest to do so. It is possible that some discount retail outlets and supermarkets might hold more restricted size ranges as their business model is one of volume sales at low margins which implies the most commonly worn sizes. At this type of outlet there is often little or no advice available on shoe sizes and customers are left to their own devices.

There are however plenty of specialist footwear retailers who can offer this advice. Clearly their shoes are more expensive and possibly here lies the rub. In the writer's long experience of the footwear industry, the general public sees footwear as a low priority purchase. Indeed, it probably always has as witnessed by universal references over the centuries to 'poor shoemakers'. So, if you want shoes that fit and are not certain what was involved, one would have thought it made sense to go to a retailer who did.

SHOE SIZING

There is one thing missing, however, and that, is the fact that the footwear industry despite having been a global one in every sense of the word for a quarter of a century still lacks a single unified system for shoe sizing. Indeed, in an age where CAD/CAM integrated design and manufacturing is in common use, shoes are still produced on lasts that are not only produced using various size grades but also vary from one manufacturer to another within the same system. There are in fact at least 11 possibilities including British, European, Russian, American, Mexican, Australian, Japanese, Korean, Centimetres, Inches and, not least, Mondopoint.

While many of these systems are

now rarely used, the situation nevertheless remains highly unsatisfactory from a consumer standpoint. A universal system, while causing short term disruption to manufacturers if introduced, would surely offer considerable long term advantages not least of which would be simplifying the global supply chain and making it easier for consumers to buy the right size. Granted there would have to be certain variations in cone height in order to cope with physiological variations such as Japanese high arches and African broad feet. A given length size wherever you were in the world would, however, always be the same.

TIME FOR A CHANGE?

There was an attempt to do this some years ago based on the Mondopoint sizing system. This was originally developed for ski boot shells where the high tooling costs called for a sizing system that would be as accurate as possible while using the minimum number of sizes. It is based on a combination of average foot length and width measured in millimeters and is therefore far more accurate than other systems, and is why it was adopted by NATO and other military forces.

The idea originally stalled mainly due to a reluctance to change on the part of certain countries that still clung to Imperial measurements rather than change to metric. Now that most of the world has gone metric, it might be time to try again. The footwear industry has been hugely innovative during the past 25 years in so many ways and, as a result, has become technically advanced and highly sophisticated. Nevertheless, it still stubbornly clings to a confusing range of sizing systems that is no longer fit for purpose.

If there was just one sizing system, consumers would only need to establish their correct size once and then be able to buy shoes from any outlet in the confidence they would fit sufficiently well to prevent discomfort and avoid permanent damage. Perhaps the blame for badly fitting shoes does after all partly lie with the industry as well as consumers. Should we perhaps take another look at this? 🌀