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### The Truth Behind Corsets

← Interesting title

Thesis: Women's fashion has always had trends that are detrimental to women's health, but the tight-lacing of corsets caused irreversible damage such as organ failure and massive skeletal structure damage on women in the 1800s.

Point One: Women's fashion was constantly changing from one impractical style after another.  
Pendergast, Sara. "Eighteenth-Century Clothing" *Fashion, Costume, and Culture: Clothing, Headwear, Body, Decorations, and Footwear Through the Ages*, 2013, Gale, <https://go-gale-com.lili.idm.oclc.org>. Accessed 20 Nov. 2019.

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#### Summary:

Women's fashion changed drastically in the Victorian era through the Edwardian era. They consistently chose more elaborate fabric to display their wealth, but the style of their dresses changed. From the early 1800s to mid-century their skirts increased in width, whereas their waists remained tightly bound in corsets to appear as small as possible. At the start of the century, their sleeves were three-quarters and their collars were very high on the neck, but as time went on women became more comfortable with displaying their bare arms and chest. By the end of the century, women wore dresses designed to make their bottoms look as big as possible instead of their hips.

#### Quotations:

"From the beginning to the middle of the century, women's clothing became larger and more laden with decoration. Wealthy women wore dresses made of brightly colored stiff silk woven with bold floral and striped designs, and many chose Chinese fabrics for their dresses. By midcentury the skirts of women's dresses held many yards of decoration, including layers of ruffles, bows, and lace, and were held out away from the hips with the help of panniers, or stiff hoops."

"In great contrast to the width of their skirts, women's waists were cinched tightly in corsets. The front of their gowns were cut deep to display the tops of their breasts and were so revealing that some women tucked lace scarves, called modesty pieces, along their necklines to hide their breasts. Most dresses had three-quarter-length sleeves to which women added engageantes, or many tiers of ruffled white lace at the elbow."

Constantakis, Sara. "Ladies' Fashions of the 1850s" vol 4, *American Era: Primary Sources*, 1854, Gale, <https://go-gale-com.lili.idm.oclc.org>. Accessed 21 Nov. 2019.

Summary: Women's fashion in England and France was extremely impractical, and women would often allow themselves to suffer in order to force their bodies to look a certain way. In America, the women also wore clothing that was restrictive and difficult to manage, but they also allowed their bodies more freedom in favor of being able to help

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their husbands and children on the prairies. However, there were many magazines and newspapers targeted towards women that made efforts to convince women that if they wanted to be taken seriously and be loved by their community they had to wear frivolous garments that made it difficult for them to walk, or even breathe.

Quotations: "Corsets were typically tightly laced for support and lined with stiffeners such as strips of metal or bone. Corsets were very uncomfortable and hindered a woman's breathing and movement. Women in the West loosened the laces and removed the stiffeners in their corsets or stopped wearing them altogether."

"*Harper's New Monthly Magazine* first published in June 1850. It featured numerous articles directed at women, including detailed descriptions and instructions aimed at helping American women keep up to date on fashion trends. The images featured in *Harper's* at mid-century showed women wearing the distinct hourglass style. Their full hips and bosoms, achieved through layers upon layers of garments such as corsets and petticoats, sometimes weighing as much as twenty-five or thirty pounds (eleven to fourteen kg) and emphasizing a tiny waist. Many women wore their hair piled high upon their heads in order to lengthen their exposed necks. The section on evening dresses in the "Autumn Fashions" feature included in this entry describes one popular dress that is composed of five separate skirts, not even including the layers of undergarments."

"The magazine also featured popular dress fabrics of the time, which were sheer, light, and thin because of all the layers a woman wore. It recommended different attire appropriate for day and evening. Day dresses tended to be somewhat lighter and allowed for more physical activity, while evening dresses were more elaborate and constructed of finer fabrics."

Point Two: Corsets were used as a way to make the waists appear as small as possible, but the garments ended up drastically changing the structure of women's bodies.

Flower, William. *Fashion in Deformity, As Illustrated in the Customs of Barbarous and Civilised Races*. Macmillan, 1881, 81-84. Accessed 26 Nov. 2019.

Summary: People throughout all-time have made the decision that beauty is worth more than comfort. However, in the 1800s, women began to take extreme measures to be considered beautiful. They began to tight lace their corsets to make their waists appear as small as possible, and because of this, they suffered permanent deformities to their bodies, such as no longer being able to take deep breaths and not being able to stand for extended amounts of time because they would faint.

Quotations: "When it is considered that the organs which are affected are those by which the important functions of respiration, circulation, and digestion are carried on, as well as those essential to the proper development and healthy growth of future generations, it is no wonder that people suffer who have reduced themselves to live under such conditions."



"Let us remember that to the Australian the nose-peg is an admired ornament, that to the Thlinket, the Botocudo, and the Bongo Negro, the lip dragged down by the heavy plug, and the ears distended by huge discs of wood...then let us carefully ask ourselves whether we are sure that in leaving nature as a standard of the beautiful, and adopting a purely conventional one, we are not falling into an error exactly similar to that of all these people whose tastes we are so ready to condemn."

Dickinson, Robert. "The Corset" *The New York Medical Journal*, Nov. 1887,  
[http://haabet.dk/patent/The\\_corset/](http://haabet.dk/patent/The_corset/). Accessed 26 Nov. 2019.

Summary: This article explains the impact that corset wearing had on women scientifically, and why it was a poor decision for women to wear them. It talks about how the internal organs of women shifted while they wore their corsets and the dangers of continued wear of the garments. In the end, the author came to the conclusion that in the short term women were not impacted greatly by the wearing of corsets, but in the long term, they would be deformed and no longer able to function in their everyday lives.

Quotations: "The shape of the corset and the strength of its bones are other factors we must know, and the habit of the individual, the resisting or yielding nature of the abdominal walls, and the readiness with which organs are displaced, bear largely on the problem."

"The inferior edge of the lung is therefore compressed, and its ability to distend the lower part of the pleural cavity seriously crippled. Compensation in part is affected by the tendency of the corset when firmly adjusted to raise the shoulders—which I find quite constant—forcing the upper lobes to do the breathing, as Sibgon has proved, raising the thoracic, or five upper ribs, widening the interspaces (also a constant condition in the female, and in this way expanding the highest part of the conical thoracic cavity."

"The earlier corsets are worn, the more the liver would be affected since it is proportionately much larger in the child than in the adult. Previous to puberty its weight may be as much as one-thirtieth, or even one-twentieth, of that of the entire body; in the adult it averages one-fortieth."

"The practice of tight-lacing...may cause displacements and malformations of the liver which may simulate enlargement and which are of considerable importance in diagnosis. Tight lacing may act on the liver in three ways—according to the situation, the tightness, and the duration of the constricting cause.

"The liver may be displaced upward or downward according as the pressure is applied below or above. The precise situation where the pressure is applied will vary with the prevailing fashion of dress; but most commonly in this country the displacement is downward, and this may be to such an extent that the lower margin reaches the ilium, and the liver appears to fill up the whole of the right side and front of the abdomen."

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"In consequence of lateral compression the liver may be elongated in its vertical diameter so that a larger portion of it is brought into apposition with the abdominal and thoracic walls. This is a very common result of tight-lacing "

"When the pressure is exerted by a tight cord, it may produce deep fissures in the substance of the liver, as the result of which portions of the organ may an may be more or less detached, and may even be felt as movable tumors through the abdominal parietes."

"Engel found the *stomach* displaced in the following remarkable manner: It was shoved to the left. Its long axis, from a horizontal or oblique direction, was changed to a vertical, so that the lesser curvature ran down directly to the left of the spinal column. The pyloric end was depressed as far as the fourth lumbar vertebra. Constriction not unlike the liver-furrow was occasionally met with, but without pathological changes in the walls. The *pancreas* may be dragged down to a perpendicular position on the face of the vertebral column reaching down to the promontory."

Thomas, Theodore. "Improprieties of Dress" *A Practical Treatise on the Diseases of Women*. 1891, *Lea Brothers and Company*, 38. Accessed 26 Nov. 2019.

Summary: This book discusses how women's fashion since the beginning of time has impacted the female body. In the "Improprieties of Dress" the author discusses the effects on women's body from wearing corsets starting at a young age. According to the author's research, wearing corsets everyday starting around age 11 and until the woman dies creates immense pressure on the wearer's organs, and the compression can cause many illnesses such as uterine diseases, respiratory issues, and heart failure.

Quotations: "The dress adopted by the women of our times may be very graceful and becoming, it may possess the great advantages of developing the beauties of the figure and concealing its defects, but it certainly is conducive to the development of uterine diseases, and proves not merely a predisposing, but an exciting cause, of them."

"The habit of contracting the body at the waist by tight clothing confines this part as if by splints; indeed, it accomplishes just what the surgeon does who bandages the chest for a fractured rib, with the intent of limiting thoracic and substituting abdominal respiration."

Point Three: Efforts were made to fight against the restricting of women, and because of that we no longer force ourselves to undergo such extremities.

Davis, Lelia. "Radical Errors in Woman's Dress" *Woman's Dress*. Department of Hygiene and Heredity, 1894, *Gale* 7-8. Accessed 26 Nov. 2019.

Summary: This book discusses what is considered fashionable for women in the 1890s, and whether they are healthy for the female body or not. In this section of the book it is discussed how detrimental it is to tight-lace a corset, and that it causes deformities. It then makes suggestions for what can be done to combat tight-lacing. It also talks about how to teach women that their bodies are beautiful the way that they were born, not because of a corset hiding all of their flaws.



Quotations: "Our present mode of dress is based upon a false ideal of women's form and ignorance of the construction of her body. Let us endeavor to change this ideal and put in its place one true to nature."

"Let us endeavor to accustom our eyes to the true proportions of woman's figure by the study of the best models in art. Our studies will make us so familiar with correct outlines and true proportions that we shall no longer be content with the violations of them which pass under our eyes every day."

"Let us encourage the study of the anatomy and the physiology of the human body. Let all women inform themselves as to the normal mode of breathing and the position, functions and relations of the different organs of the body. Once knowledge upon these points is commonly disseminated it is inevitable that there shall arise a perception of the necessity of suiting our costumes to our bodies instead of suiting our bodies to our costumes."

"In this age of organization among women it is very possible for a sufficient number to unite in the assumption of a more rational mode of dress to give prestige to the movement and thus form a nucleus around which those rationally inclined may gather."

Baughman, Judith. "Women's Fashion." *American Decades*, vol 3: 1920-1929, 2001, Gale, <https://go-gale-com.lili.idm.oclc.org>. Accessed 26 Nov. 2019.

Summary: Once it was shown how detrimental it was on a woman's body to wear a corset, women began to wear looser clothing. Their fashion became more about comfort and about proving that they own their own bodies than about looking as thin and pretty as possible for the male eye. There were still many fashion styles that were detrimental to their health, but women were no longer forcing their bodies to appear multiple sizes smaller than they actually were.

Quotations: "Women's fashion in the 1920s was most fully embodied in the "garçonne"—or "little boy"—look. Adopted by the young, emancipated flappers in Europe and the United States, the style deemphasized the mature female form by flattening the breasts, dropping waists to the hipline, and, in 1925, shortening skirts to just below the knee."

"Flappers allegedly 'parked their corsets' in the ladies' room before joining their dates on the dance floor. Whatever the truth of this story, during the 1920s women's undergarments became progressively lighter in fabric and design. Torso-length corsets worn with linen or heavy cotton camisoles and long panties were replaced by lightweight rubber girdles and silk or rayon brassieres and cami-knickers, a combination of camisole and mid-thigh-length panties. During the 1920s the brassiere was used to flatten, not support, the breasts, though Ida Cohen Rosenthal invented the modern uplift bra during the same period. In 1923 rayon (then called "artificial silk") stockings became widely available, and women wore these flesh-colored hose supported by garter belts or rolled over garters above the knee."

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