

Fainting Ladies: Fact or Fiction?

Sonia

When the word 'corset' comes to mind, many people think of women with waists less than twenty inches around and fainting every other second. In this paper, be prepared to discover the truth about corsets. What exactly is a corset and why are they worn? Who wore corsets and how often? What were the effects on the body of the wearer? Do the pros outweigh the cons?

To begin with, what exactly is a corset and what purposes do they serve? A corset is an article of clothing that was first developed in Spain in the 16th century (Corset Encyclopedia Britannica). The 19th century corset was used to gain the small waist of the period, and was modeled after the 15th century bodice, which consisted of two pieces of linen pasted together (Thames & Hudson). A corset typically consisted of a body made of cotton or muslin, with whale bone paneling and metal eyelets for lacing. Barbara Jones states that "whale bone is preferred because it becomes flexible and easily shaped when it is heated." Margo Demello points out that lacing, which provided adjustment for the corset, was typically located in back, where it may be tightened by mothers, servants, or even husbands. Oftentimes, the person tightening the corset would place his/her knee or foot on the back of the wearer so that the optimal tightness could be reached. (Margo Demello) Many times laces would snap from tension. The tighter the laces were pulled, the more extreme the effect was on the body. There were differing types of corsets, some that covered the torso alone, others that extended all the way from the torso to the hips, and still others that only covered the waist (Demello).

You may be wondering why anyone would want to wear an article of clothing that sounds so incredibly uncomfortable. The purpose of the corset was to help stiffen and upright the posture, shrink the waist line, provide the body shape of the era, and elevate the upper portion of

the body. According to James and Dorothy Volo, women's corsets generally shrunk the waist line, brought the hips outward and thrust the bust forward. There were many desired shapes the corset helped create, including the s-bend silhouette, the hourglass figure, and the v-shaped form. Many of these shapes required the waist line to be in the mid to upper teens. The hourglass figure was the most sought after figure of the 19th century. This figure was so important, that oftentimes, a corset like belt was placed on baby girls soon after they were born. According to Demello, in the Victorian Era, a stiff, upright posture for both men and women was associated with virtue and discipline. Women who let their bodies go loose were often considered immoral and lazy. Corsets were also used to help strengthen back muscles and helped speed the healing process of spine or internal injuries. (Demello) Now days, corsets are used for the same healing purposes, though they may go by a different name and differ slightly in form; an example of this is the back brace. 19th century corsets were worn for the main purpose of shaping the body; as time progressed, they were used for healing as well. Hopefully, you are now able to understand what corsets are and why they are worn.

Secondly, who wore corsets and how often were they worn? Although women were the main wearers of this article of clothing, surprisingly, some men wore them as well. Upper class women of the 19th century often competed for the most feminine form, which revolved around the hourglass figure bestowed by the corset. According to Demello's article, by the 19th century, less expensive corsets were produced which were worn by both American and European women, although the hourglass figure was still seen as symbolic of the upper classes. Not only did adult women wear corsets; many baby girls whose families felt the hourglass figure was an absolute, would start off with a stiff cloth belt soon after birth. (Demello) As a child progressed, so did his or her corset. Many children went from the stiff belt to the training corset, to full blown adult

corsets (National park service 14-17). Families who did not feel the hourglass figure was detrimental would start wearing training corsets around age 12, as stated by James Volo, “light corsets were introduced to girls around age 12 and certainly by the age of puberty.” As mentioned previously, not only girls and women wore corsets. In the early 19th century, men also strove for the hourglass figure, though perhaps not as drastically as the women of the time did. Men also wore corsets to stiffen their posture, giving them an upright and manly look (Demello). One question that may be floating around in your head may be something along the lines of, “how often did people wear corsets?” The truth is, the length of time a corset was worn varied greatly. Some people only wore corsets during the day. We see that those who were into tight lacing and a permanent hourglass figure, often wore corsets for days or even months at a time (Demello). Corsets were worn by both men and women, children and adults, and were worn for any amount of time and depended on the requirements of the form desired.

Finally, what effects do corsets have on the body of the wearer? To begin with, let’s go over the positive effects of the corset. Corsets provide support for the back and help to strengthen muscles after a spine or internal injury (Demello). Corsets also help provide a trimmer figure and good posture, the latter of which I can personally relate with. Currently, I am participating in a youth volunteer interpretive program where the students and teachers alike dress in period clothing, which happens to be from 19th century. As I am a teen, a corset is required. I have noticed that while slouching or leaning back, the corset inhibits my breathing and forces me to sit upright; even though it is only worn moderately snug. Corsets, when worn tightly, redistribute flesh and fat around the body, which creates a nice picture but is not healthy in any way.

The negative effects of the corset are slightly more extensive: atrophying, damage to ribs and internal organs, and breathing inhibition. To begin with, the corset, if worn for a prolonged

period of time, can result in damage to the ribs and the back atrophying because of disuse (Demello). Actually, when the hourglass figure was popular, damage to the ribs and intestines was unavoidable. Tight lacing resulted in permanent deformity. The article, “brief history: disfiguring a woman” states that “The body cannot just shrink the waist without causing internal damage. The ribs get pushed upwards and the normal space that separates the lower half of the rib cage gets meshed together and overlaps.” What about women fainting when things became frightening or very tense? Did that only happen in the movies? The answer is: corsets. When wearing a tight corset, breathing was inhibited and the wearer had to rely only on diaphragmatic breathing, which created palpitations, which came about by physical exercise such as dancing, or anxiety; this resulted in many swooning ladies (Ildiko Csengei). This was something that according to Ildiko Csengei, “further reinforced the idea of the constitutional weakness and disability of the female body.” So you see, corsets are helpful in the areas of good posture and some healing processes, but also, if worn tightly, result in extreme damage to the body.

In summary, corsets were typically made of cloth with whale bone paneling and metal eyelets for lacing. Corsets were worn primarily to provide a desired shape, such as the hourglass figure, though they were also beneficial to good posture and a trim figure. You saw that both males and female alike wore corsets, and corsets could be worn any amount of time. The effects of corsets are extensive, and contain both pros and cons. To conclude, corsets, if worn, should be worn only ‘loosely’ (so to speak) and not excessively; otherwise, that fainting heroine may become you.

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