

Hammer Toes

What is a hammer toe?

A hammer toe is a deformity of the second, third or fourth toes. In this condition, the toe is bent at the middle joint, so that it resembles a hammer. Initially, hammer toes are flexible and can be corrected with simple measures but, if left untreated, they can become fixed and require surgery. People with hammer toe may have corns or calluses on the top of the middle joint of the toe or on the tip of the toe. They may also feel pain in their toes or feet and have difficulty finding comfortable shoes.

What causes a hammer toe?

Hammer toes result from a muscle imbalance within the foot. This may result from wearing tight shoe gear placing the toes in a contracted position, or more likely a structural foot abnormality allowing subtle muscle advantages over time. Muscles work in pairs to straighten and bend the toes. If the toe is bent and held in one position long enough, the muscles tighten and cannot stretch out. The result is a muscle imbalance within the toe in which one muscle gains advantage over another and leads to a contracting toe. If this remains uncorrected, the toe becomes rigid and difficult to straighten. This becomes more problematic when the curled toe rubs on shoe gear and produces painful corns and calluses.

What is the treatment for a hammer toe?

Since hammer toes are by their nature a structural deformity. As a result, the treatment may be directed at relief of symptoms or to alleviate the problem of the structural deformity. Relieving the symptoms of the hammer toe is the main goal associated with conservative treatment. However, if the deformity is severe enough surgery may be required to provide the best correction as well as allowing conservative treatment to have the best chance of success.

Treatment

Because bunions are progressive, they don't go away, and will usually get worse over time. But not all cases are alike—some bunions progress more rapidly than others. Once your podiatric surgeon has evaluated your particular case, a treatment plan can be developed that is suited to your needs.

Conservative Treatment

- **Footwear** - Picking appropriate footwear is the beginning of the conservative treatment. The shoes should have soft, roomy toe boxes. Shoes should be one-half inch longer than your longest toe. (Note: For many people, the second toe is longer than the big toe.) Avoid wearing tight, narrow, high-heeled shoes. You may also be able to find a shoe with a deep toe box that accommodates the hammer toe. Or, a shoe repair shop may be able to stretch the toe box so that it bulges out around the toe. Sandals may help, as long as they do not pinch or rub other areas of the foot.
- **Exercises** - Your doctor may also prescribe some toe exercises that you can do at home to stretch and strengthen the muscles. For example, you can gently stretch the toes manually. You can use your toes to pick things up off the floor. While you watch television or read, you can put a towel flat under your feet and use your toes to crumple it. It is important to help that these exercises will probably only help hammer toes that are in the beginning stages, and will not be very beneficial to long standing hammer toes that contain a structural component.
- **Padding** - Finally, your doctor may recommend that you use commercially available straps, cushions or nonmedicated corn pads to relieve symptoms. If you have diabetes, poor circulation or a lack of feeling in your feet, talk to your doctor before attempting any self-treatment.

Surgical Treatment

Surgical treatment is always a last resort for hammer toe treatment. However, it is often necessary due to the difficulty in treating hammer toes conservatively. The surgery is performed as an outpatient procedure often at the local hospital operating room by your podiatrist. The actual procedure will depend on the type and extent of the deformity. In most cases the patient is allowed to resume normal weight bearing afterwards in a surgical shoe for protection. Your podiatrist will be able to educate you more on the details of the procedure as well as what to expect if this is necessary.

