

WHAT IS A HAMMERTOES?

A hammertoe is a contracture (bending) of one or both joints of the second, third, fourth, or fifth (little) toes. This abnormal bending can put pressure on the toe when wearing shoes, causing problems to develop.

Hammertoes usually start out as mild deformities and get progressively worse over time. In the earlier stages, hammertoes are flexible and symptoms can often be managed with non-invasive measures. But if left untreated, hammertoes can become more rigid and will not respond to non-surgical treatment.



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HAMMERTOES



COMMON SYMPTOMS OF HAMMERTOES

- Pain or irritation of the affected toe when wearing shoes.
- Corns (a buildup of callus skin) on the top side, or end of the toe, or between two toes. Corns are caused by constant friction against the shoe. They may be soft or hard, depending upon their location.
- Calluses (another type of skin buildup) on the bottom of the toe or on the ball of the foot. Corns and calluses can be painful and make it difficult to find a comfortable shoe.

CAUSES OF HAMMERTOES

The most common cause of hammertoe is a muscle/tendon imbalance. This imbalance, which leads to a bending of the toe, results from structural changes in the foot that occur over time in some people.

Hammertoes are often aggravated by shoes that do not fit properly—for example, shoes that crowd the toes. In some cases, ill-fitting shoes can actually cause hammertoes.

Occasionally, hammertoe is caused by some kind of trauma, such as a previously broken toe. In some people, hammertoes are inherited.



TREATMENT

There are a variety of treatment options for hammertoe. The treatment your podiatrist recommends will depend on the severity of your hammertoe and other factors. In some cases, surgery is the best option for treating hammertoes. However, in less severe cases, there are a number of non-surgical treatment options available.

WHEN IS SURGERY NEEDED?

In some cases, often when the hammertoe has become more rigid, surgery is needed to relieve that pain and discomfort caused by the deformity.

Your podiatrist will discuss the options and select a plan tailored to your needs. Among other concerns, he/she will take into consideration the type of shoes you want to wear, your activity level, your age, and the severity of the hammertoe.

One type of surgical procedure performed to correct a hammertoe is called arthroplasty. In this procedure, the surgeon removes a small section of the bone from the affected joint.

Another surgical option is an arthrodesis (a procedure that involves fusing a small joint in the toe to straighten it). A pin or other small fixation device is typically used to hold the toe in position while the bones are healing.

It is possible that you may require other procedures as well, especially when the hammertoe condition is severe.

NON-SURGICAL TREATMENTS

Trimming Corns and Calluses: Corns and calluses frequently result from abnormal pressure caused by hammer-toes. As they thicken, more pressure is created with associated pain. Thinning the corn or callus is helpful. Trimming should be done by a healthcare professional.

Padding Corns and Calluses: Your podiatrist can provide or prescribe pads designed to shield corns from irritation.

Changes in Footwear: Avoid shoes with pointed toes, shoes that are too short, or shoes with high heels—conditions that can force your toe against the front of the shoe.

Orthotic Devices: A custom orthotic device placed in your shoe may help control the muscle/tendon imbalance.

Medications: Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) such as ibuprofen are often prescribed to reduce pain and inflammation.

Splinting/Strapping: Splints or small straps may be applied to keep the toe in a better position. Taping, however, does not produce a permanent straightening of the involved toe.