

Hammertoes, Mallet Toes and Claw Toes

Corns, Calluses and Pain May Indicate Joint Problems

Many disorders can affect the joints of the toes, causing pain and preventing the foot from functioning as it should. People of all ages can have toe problems, from infants born with deformities, to older adults with acquired deformities.

The major culprit of toe deformities in adults is tendon imbalance. When the natural function of the foot is disrupted (through a variety of causes), the tendons may stretch or tighten to compensate. Thus, people with abnormally long toes, flat feet or high arches have a greater tendency to develop toe deformities.

Arthritis that slowly destroys the joint surface is another major cause of discomfort and deformity. Toe deformities also can be aggravated by restrictive or ill-fitting footwear worn for a prolonged amount of time. Or, problems with toe position may occur if a fractured toe heals in a poor position.

Common Deformities

The most common digital deformities are hammertoes, claw toes, mallet toes, bone spurs, overlapping and underlapping toes, and curled toes.

These deformities may or may not be painful. Corns and calluses - a buildup of skin on the affected joint, often associated with bursitis (inflammation of small pouches, called bursas, which lie above the joint between the tendon and skin) - are perhaps the most noticeable and bothersome symptoms. If deformities are left untreated, the toe's mobility may become limited, and more serious problems, such as skin ulceration and infection, may develop.

Hammertoes



Mallet Toes and Claw Toes



Mallet Toe



Claw Toe

A hammertoe may be flexible or rigid, and may occur on any of the lesser toes. Ligaments and tendons that have tightened cause the toe's joints to buckle, cocking the toe upward. Shoes then rub on the prominent portion of the toe, leading to inflammation or bursitis. Corns and calluses soon form.

Mallet toes and claw toes are similar in appearance to hammertoes, but joints at different locations on the toe are affected. The joint at the end of the toe buckles in a mallet toe, while a claw toe involves abnormal positions of all three joints of the toe.

Bone Spur



A bone spur is an overgrowth of bone that may occur alone or along with a hammertoe. Pain, corns and calluses are the major symptoms. Left untreated, a bone spur may eventually be accompanied by bursitis or small skin ulceration.

Treatments for Toe Deformities

Any toe problems that cause pain or discomfort while walking should be given prompt attention by a podiatric surgeon. Ignoring the symptoms can aggravate the condition, and over time may lead to an infection, a breakdown of tissue or ulceration. For people with poor circulation or an underlying medical problem, loss of the toe is possible.

Conservative Treatments For people who have minor discomfort, less advanced conditions or are unable to undergo surgery, the symptoms may be treated conservatively (without surgery). This usually involves:

- Trimming or padding corns and calluses.
- Wearing supportive orthotics (individually fitted plastic or leather inserts) in shoes. This helps relieve pressure on toe deformities and allows the toes and major joints of the foot to function more appropriately.
- Splints or small straps to realign the toe.
- Wearing shoes with a wider toe box.

Unfortunately, conservative treatments provide only temporary relief of symptoms - they do not correct the deformity.

Surgical Treatments When the deformity is painful or permanent, surgical correction is recommended to relieve pain, correct the problem and provide a stable, functional toe. Some of the most common surgical procedures are described below.

Depending on health status, surgery may be conducted on an outpatient basis at the surgeon's office. The procedures are usually comfortably performed under local anesthesia or with intravenous sedatives administered by trained anesthesia personnel.