

Hammer Toe

A **hammer toe** is a foot problem where the middle joint of the toe bends upward and the end of the toe bends down. It looks like a claw or hammer. It most often happens in the second toe (next to the big toe). It can also affect the third, fourth, or fifth toe. Hammer toes are more common in females than males. You may also see it written as one word (hammertoe or hammertoes).

There are two different types:

1. Flexible hammer toe
2. Rigid hammer toe

Flexible Hammer Toes

This type is less serious because it can be diagnosed and treated while still in the developmental stage. They are called flexible hammer toes because they are still moveable at the joint.

Rigid Hammer Toes

This type is more developed and more serious than the flexible condition. Rigid hammer toes can be seen in patients with severe arthritis or in patients who wait too long to get treatment. The tendons in a rigid hammer toe become tight, and the joint may become stiff. When this happens, surgery is usually the next step of treatment.

Causes

Hammer toe happens when the muscles in your toes are not balanced the right way. This puts extra pressure on the tendons and joints, which makes the toe bend in a strange way. Sometimes, a hammer toe can also be caused by family history or an injury. Arthritis is another factor. The balance around the toe in people with arthritis is disrupted. Wearing shoes that are too tight and cause the toes to squeeze can also cause a hammer toe to form.

Symptoms

Symptoms of a hammer toe include the following:

- Pain at the top of the bent toe when there is pressure from footwear.
- Corns form on the top of the joint.
- Redness and swelling at the joint.
- Restricted or painful motion of the toe joint.
- Pain in the ball of the foot at the base of the affected toe.

Home Treatment

For relief:

- Put a hammer toe pad that does not have medicine around the bump on your toe. This will help lower the pressure there.
- Wear a shoe with a deep toe box.
- If the hammer toe becomes inflamed and painful, use ice packs many times a day to reduce swelling.
- Avoid heels more than two inches tall.
- A loose-fitting pair of shoes can help protect the foot while reducing pressure on the affected toe. This will make walking a little easier until you can see a podiatrist (foot doctor). While this treatment will make the hammer toe feel better, it does not cure the condition. Schedule a visit with a podiatrist. They will help treat the toe to allow for normal foot function.
- Avoid wearing shoes that are too tight or narrow. Children should have their shoes properly fitted on a regular basis. Their feet often outgrow their shoes quickly.

When to Visit a Podiatrist

If pain continues, see a podiatrist. If left untreated, hammer toes can become rigid, making non-surgical treatment less of an option.

Diagnosis and Treatment

How foot doctors treat a hammer toe depends on how bad it is and what kind it is. If the problem is found early, it is less likely that surgery will be needed. The doctor will examine and x-ray the affected area. They will talk with you about a treatment plan that works best for you.

Padding and Taping

Padding and taping are often the first steps in a treatment plan. Padding the hammer toe helps minimize pain. It also helps the patient continue a normal, active life. Taping may change the imbalance around the toes and relieve stress and pain.

Medicine

Doctors can give medicine to reduce swelling and pain, or use cortisone shots to help with discomfort from the joint problem.

Orthotic Devices

Custom shoe inserts made by your foot doctor can help your feet work better. These special inserts, called orthotics, may make your symptoms less painful and stop the hammer toe from getting worse.

Surgical Options

There are different surgeries that doctors who treat feet can do. If the problem is not too serious, surgery can remove the bump and help the toe line up the right way. This may also make the pain go away. If the toe is badly bent and cannot be straightened easily, a more complicated surgery might be needed.

Healing takes time. Some swelling and discomfort are common for several weeks following surgery. Any pain can be managed with medicines prescribed by your podiatrist.

Prevention

There are many things you can do to help prevent hammer toes from forming or getting worse:

- Wear supportive shoes to help prevent deformities. Hammer toes are often related to faulty foot mechanics, especially foot flattening.
- Wear special shoe inserts made just for you by your foot doctor. These inserts can help keep hammer toes from getting worse or even stop them from forming.
- Avoid shoes with narrow or pointed toe boxes that can squeeze the toes.

Your health care team may have given you this information as part of your care. If so, please use it and call if you have any questions. If this information was not given to you as part of your care, please check with your doctor. This is not medical advice. This is not to be used for diagnosis or treatment of any medical condition. Because each person's health needs are different, you should talk with your doctor or others on your health care team when using this information. If you have an emergency, please call 911. Copyright © 5/2026 University of Wisconsin Hospitals and Clinics Authority. All rights reserved. Produced by the Department of Nursing. HF#8515