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Bunion / Bunionette

Bunion, or hallux valgus, is a deformity that affects the big toe, causing the toe to angle towards the lesser toes. This leads to pain at the base of the inner aspect of the big toe and difficulty with shoe wear. The deformity is common, and does not always cause symptoms. The deformity is progressive, but sometimes at a very slow rate. Women with bunions outnumber men by about 10:1. There is an association with shoes that are too small, and with high-heels.



Symptoms:

Deformity is the typical first symptom. Pain can develop later, usually due to pressure from the prominent bone along the inner aspect of the foot at the joint at the base of the big toe. Swelling and a fluid collection can also develop. With severe cases, the big toe may actually overlap or underlap the second toe. With progressive deformity, shoe wear can be challenging.



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Cause:

Overly tight or small shoes, and high heels are definite causative agents, and explain the higher prevalence of bunions in women. There are also genetic causes, as bunions tend to run in families, affecting both men and women.

Diagnosis:

A careful history and physical examination will diagnose bunions. Plain x-rays are obtained to evaluate the severity of the deformity, and to assess for arthritic changes at the joint that can affect treatment. Advanced imaging is almost never needed.

Treatment:

Bunions are best treated with prevention—wearing properly sized shoes and avoiding high heels. When pain develops, wearing shoes with a large toe box may accommodate for the deformity, and avoid pressure at the base of the big toe. Orthotics and physical therapy are not usually indicated. When conservative treatment fails, and there is progressive pain or deformity, surgery may be recommended.

There are a huge variety of surgical procedures to treat bunion deformities. Most involve removal of the bony prominence along the side of the big toe joint and correction of the bony deformity. This typically involves cutting and realigning the bone. Surgery is done in an outpatient surgery setting, and healing may take 2-3 months.

Bunionette:

Also known as “baby bunions” and Tailor’s bunion, bunionettes are similar bony deformities that affect the joint at the base of the 5th toe, rather than the big toe. Bunionette can be caused by tight shoes, and is also more common in women. Treatment is the same as for bunions, with initial conservative care, then surgery when there is failure of care and progressive symptoms.



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