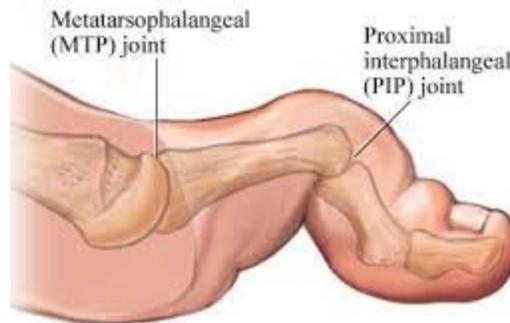


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Hammertoe

Hammertoe is a deformity that can affect the middle toes (2nd-4th) that causes the middle joint to bend, resembling the shape of a hammer. Hammertoes initially may be flexible, and treatable with simple measures, but over time they can become more rigid, causing a fixed deformity. Painful calluses can form under the ball of the foot, on the tip of the toe, or on the top of the deformed toe or toes.



Symptoms:

Deformity is usually the first symptom. Pain can develop later, usually due to pressure on the tip of the toe or from rubbing of the deformed toe against the shoe. Pain can also develop in the ball of the foot. Difficulty finding shoes that are comfortable can follow.

Cause:

Hammertoes are caused by muscle imbalances that prevent the toe joints from bending and straightening normally, or by narrow shoes and high heels, or a combination of all these factors. There may be a genetic predisposition.



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Diagnosis:

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

Treatment:

Hammertoes are best treated with prevention—wearing properly sized shoes and avoiding high heels. When deformity or pain develops, wearing shoes with a large toe box may accommodate for the deformity, and avoid pressure on the toes. Stretching exercises may help early on when the deformity is flexible. 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 variety of surgical procedures to treat hammertoe deformities, including joint reconstruction and fusion of the affected joints. Surgery is done in an outpatient surgery setting, often under local anesthetic, and healing may take 2-3 months.