

PROBLEMS WITH YOUR LITTLE TOES

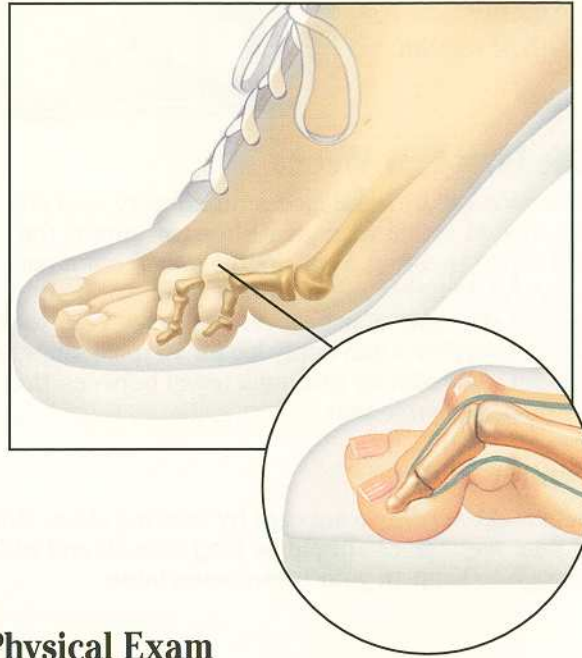
Your little toes help to balance and propel your body when you move. As your foot flattens, the little toes bend to grip the ground. Then they straighten, acting like levers to help push your foot so you can walk, run, or dance. But if the front of your foot is wide, you may develop a problem known as a **hammer toe**. Hammer toes are little toes that buckle or curl under. Over time, these toes may hurt and make movement more difficult. But you don't have to live with pain. With your doctor's help, even severe hammer toes can usually be treated so you can move more easily.

Footnote

Wearing tight pantyhose, socks, or shoes may increase your risk of developing hammer toes.

WHAT ARE HAMMER TOES?

In general, the term "hammer toe" describes a buckling of any of the toe joints. Joints at the end or middle of the toe, as well as the joint near the ball of the foot, may be affected. Toe joints usually curl because of a muscle imbalance or tight tendons. Hammer toes vary in severity and in the number of joints and toes involved.



Physical Exam

Your doctor will examine all your toes, testing whether or not buckled joints can be moved. Your feet will also be checked for any skin changes. **Corns** (a buildup of dead skin cells) often form between curled toes or on top of buckled joints where shoes rub. If irritated, corns may turn into open wounds and become infected.

Testing

X-rays may be taken of a curled toe to show the amount of deformity. An x-ray may also show whether or not the joint is affected by arthritis.



Types of Hammer Toes

Hammer toes may be **flexible** or **rigid**, depending on the joint's ability to move. A flexible joint may become more rigid as you age.

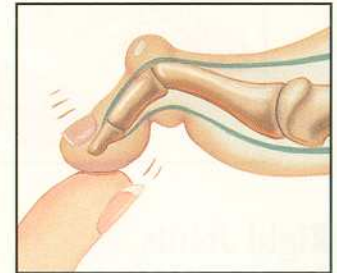
A Flexible Joint

You can straighten a flexible hammer toe with your fingers. Although they look painful, flexible hammer toes may not hurt.

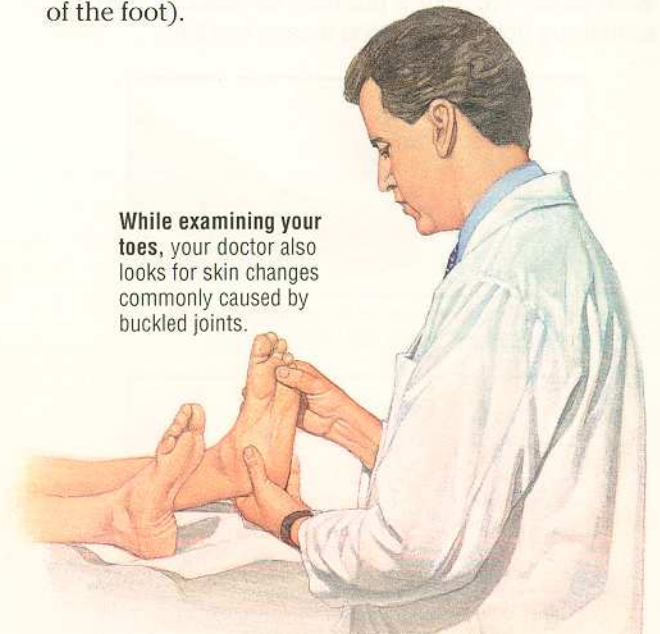


A Rigid Joint

A rigid hammer toe cannot be moved, even with the fingers. Rigid joints may cause pain and distort foot movement. This may put extra stress on the ball of the foot, causing a **callus** (a corn on the bottom of the foot).



While examining your toes, your doctor also looks for skin changes commonly caused by buckled joints.



TREATING HAMMER TOES

If your symptoms are mild, changing shoes may be all the treatment you need. Using a splint or pad to hold your toes straight also may help. Or try cushioning corns and calluses with felt padding. If your symptoms are severe, surgery may be needed. The type of procedure often depends on whether your toe joints are flexible or rigid.

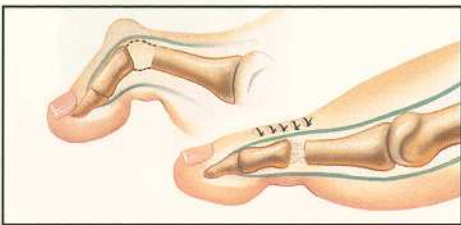
Flexible Joints

To release a buckled joint, the tight tendon (often the bottom one) is cut and repositioned.

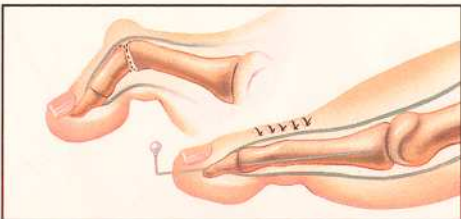


Rigid Joints

A piece of bone may be removed to help straighten a rigid toe. Two surgical examples are shown below. With either surgery, a pin may be used to hold the remaining bone in position during healing.



With **arthroplasty**, part of the curled joint is cut away. The "gap" fills in with fibrous tissue.



With **fusion**, the joint cartilage is removed. The toe bones heal as one longer bone.

AFTER SURGERY

Almost all hammer-toe surgeries are outpatient procedures. In fact, you may even be able to bear weight on your foot by the time you go home. For best results, however, you may need to wear a surgical shoe for several weeks.



The First Few Weeks

Your foot will be bandaged after surgery, and you may need to wear a surgical shoe to support the foot during healing. Your doctor may recommend a special dressing to limit swelling. Elevation and ice can also help. For best results, raise your foot above heart level and apply ice for 15 to 20 minutes. Protect your skin by placing a towel between the ice pack and your skin.

Proper Shoes

Help make surgery a success by wearing shoes that fit your feet. Shoes should be long enough and wide enough to keep all your toes comfortable.

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F O O T C A R E

HAMMER TOES

