



# Hammertoes

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## **What's the problem?**

Hammertoe is the general term used to describe an abnormal or “crooked” toe. As the toe becomes deformed, it rubs against the shoe and the irritation causes the body to build up more and thicker skin to help protect the area. The common name for the thicker skin is a corn. At first, this thick skin helps reduce irritation to the bone prominence, but as the skin becomes thicker, it adds to the pressure from the shoe. Periodic trimming of the corn may give temporary relief. However, over a period of time, a bursa may develop and if it becomes inflamed (bursitis), the area becomes red, swollen and painful. It may also become infected.

## **How did this happen?**

Shoes can contribute to pain and discomfort from hammertoes but, the size, shape and other characteristics of our feet are hereditary. The contraction and/or rotation of toes can be the result of poor mechanics of the foot. A severe bunion may cause a hammertoe, as the great toe twists over or under the second toe, causing it to dislocate. The crooked toe is irritated by shoe pressure on the joint or spur. As a result, the skin becomes thicker to form a protection. The thicker the skin, the more pressure and eventually, a bursitis under the corn may develop. This causes the joint to become red, swollen and painful. Additionally, the skin can break down and become infected.

## **How is it Diagnosed?**

The diagnosis of hammertoes is initially made by a simple exam of your feet. X-rays may be necessary to evaluate the severity and type of deformity.

Additional lab tests may be necessary to rule out infection or other medical conditions.

### **How can I Care of Myself?**

The most important thing to do is to purchase well fitted, comfortable, low heeled shoes that do not irritate the crooked toe. Reduce the amount of time you wear high heel-shoes to a minimum. High-heel shoes cause the tendons of the toes to pull them up into a contracted position. Tennis type and walking shoes have significantly decreased the complaint of many people with hammertoe deformities. Although the crooked toe is still present, it may not hurt if the shoe is large enough.

### **How Will my Doctor Care for me?**

Treatment may range from more appropriate footwear to periodic trimming and padding of the corn. Other treatments and recommendations include:

- Cortisone injections, if a bursitis is present.
- Antibiotics, if an infection is present.
- Custom-made removable accommodative pads.

If conservative treatment is unsuccessful, your doctor may suggest a surgical procedure.

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Author: Crystal Murray Holmes, DPM

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