



Suffolk Podiatry

Painful Toe Joints (*including Bunions*)

What causes pain in the toe joints?

Joint pain in the toes is relatively common as we get older but it can also affect children's feet. The three most common (and often inherited) toe joint conditions are:

- 1) Hallux abducto valgus - more commonly known as 'bunions', where the big toe angles towards the neighbouring toe with a painful bump on the side of the foot. A similar condition affecting the small toe is called a "Tailor's bunion"
- 2) Hallux limitus or Hallux rigidus - a stiffening of the big toe joint due to wear and tear where movement becomes limited or even progresses to being completely rigid. This is more often associated with a painful bump on top of the toe joint
- 3) Hammer toes – a condition where the smaller toes become clawed



What are the symptoms?

Aside from the change in shape of the foot, many people do not experience any pain. However, symptoms often occur as a result of poor/ill-fitting footwear and include:

- Pain/soreness
- Inflammation/redness
- Burning sensation/numbness
- Callus formation on or between the toes – typically occurs between the first and second toe with bunions, or the top of the joint with hammer toes.
- Restricted joint movement
- Swelling over the joint (bursa)

Self-help Advice

This advice will not reverse the bunion or hammer toe but will aim to reduce the discomfort you are experiencing:

Footwear

Wear shoes with more room – you might need to go up a size to accommodate the enlarged joint; this is often all that is needed to relieve symptoms.

Suffolk Podiatry

Podiatry Hub, Riverside Clinic 2-4 Landseer Rd, Ipswich, Suffolk , IP3 0AZ

www.suffolkfed.org.uk

1 of 2

- Choose trainer-style shoes that fit well. These should have a wide and deep toe box and have an adjustable fastening such as laces
- Avoid heeled/wedged and slip on footwear
- Wear soft leather shoes rather than man-made fibres
- Do not wear high heels or tight pointy footwear

More comprehensive footwear advice is available from the podiatry page of our website.

Pain Relief

You may find pain killers such as paracetamol or ibuprofen helpful if you are able to take them. Topical anti-inflammatory gels (e.g. Emulgel) can also help.

Protective padding

Padding can prevent rubbing/friction of the joint. Most high street chemists will stock bunion padding/shields. Removable padding is often better than pads which adhere directly to the skin. Sometimes hammer toes will be most painful on the tip of the toe, and these can be helped by wearing a toe support (sometimes called a “toe prop” or “bolster”) to lift the tip of the toe off the ground.

Ice packs

If the joint is particularly inflamed, ice can help to reduce inflammation. Apply a bag of crushed ice or frozen peas wrapped in a tea towel for up to 5 minutes.

Callus (hard skin)

Callus can be controlled by careful filing down with a long-handled emery board or using a pumice stone. The daily application of an emollient cream is also helpful; these are available from most high street chemists.

Bunion Splints

There is little evidence to support the use of bunion splints, although it has been suggested that they can help to stretch tendons and muscles around the joint while you are asleep. Bunion splints are not recommended if you have diabetes.

Bunion exercises

There is no evidence to support bunion exercises, but some patients have found them to be helpful in reducing symptoms. Place your feet side by side and use your hands to stretch your toes towards each other (you can do this whilst seated).

Weight

Try to lose weight if you are overweight. Search the internet for ‘NHS BMI calculator’.

Will I need surgery?

Surgery should only ever be a last resort. If symptoms persist or worsen, you can ask your doctor to refer you for an assessment with a podiatric surgeon or an orthopaedic surgeon. You will only be considered for surgery if you can show that symptoms have not improved after following the above advice for at least three months, especially the advice regarding footwear.

