



Suffolk Podiatry

Painful Toe Joints

What causes pain in the toe joints?

Toe joint pain is common in adults but can also affect children and teenagers. Some toe joint conditions can run in families. The three most common are:

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 little toe is called a "Tailor's bunion"

Hallux limitus or Hallux rigidus - a condition affecting the big toe joint, sometimes referred to as 'wear and tear', where movement gradually becomes reduced, causing stiffness, and in some cases the joint may eventually become completely rigid. This is often associated with a painful bump on top of the joint.



Hammer / Clawed toes – a condition where the smaller toes become bent.

What are the symptoms?

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

- Pain / soreness.
- Redness / swelling / warmth.
- Burning sensation/numbness.
- Callus formation on or between the toes – typically occurs between the first and second toe with bunions.
- Restricted joint movement.
- Swelling over the joint (bursa).

Self-help advice

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

Footwear: Wearing roomier shoes is often enough to relieve symptoms. You may need a wider fitting or a larger shoe size to accommodate the enlarged joint.

- Choose trainer style shoes that are well fitted. These should have a wide and deep toe box and have an adjustable fastening such as laces
- Avoid tight, narrow, high-heeled, wedged or slip-on footwear.

For more information on footwear see our footwear advice leaflet on the Suffolk GP website:
<https://suffolkfed.org.uk/healthcare-services/podiatry/>

Pain Relief: You may find pain relief medication, such as paracetamol or ibuprofen helpful if you are able to take them. Topical anti-inflammatory gels can also help.

Protective padding: Bunion padding and shields can prevent rubbing/friction of the joint. Removable padding is often better than those pads which stick directly to the skin. Hammer toes can be helped by wearing toe supports which lift the tip of the toe off the ground. You may need to wear a wider-fitting shoe to accommodate any padding.

Ice packs: If the joint is particularly sore, swollen, or warm, ice can help. 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 a moisturising cream is also helpful.

Bunion splints: There is little evidence that bunion splints improve the position of the toe. Bunion splints are not recommended if you have diabetes.

Bunion exercises: There is limited evidence to support bunion exercises help to improve the shape of the toe joint

Reducing pressure on your feet: Reducing excess pressure on the feet, including through weight management where appropriate, may help improve symptoms. Feel Good Suffolk offer s support for a range of lifestyle changes: [Home - Feel Good Suffolk](#)

Will I need surgery?

Surgery should only ever be a last resort due to potential complications and lengthy recovery times. If symptoms persist or worsen, you can ask your GP practice to refer you for an assessment with a podiatric 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.

Surgery is not usually recommended for children and young people under the age of 16 because the bones are still developing. Operating before the foot has fully matured can increase the risk of the deformity returning later.

Suffolk Podiatry
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An NHS service provided by Suffolk GP Federation working with ESNEFT (East Suffolk & North Essex NHS Foundation Trust) in the East, West Suffolk NHS Foundation Trust in the West, Suffolk County Council and Norfolk & Suffolk NHS Foundation Trust

