Hammer, Claw, or Mallet Toe: Should I Have Surgery?

Here’s a record of your answers. You can use it to talk with your doctor or loved ones about your decision.

1. Get the facts
2. Compare your options
3. What matters most to you?
4. Where are you leaning now?
5. What else do you need to make your decision?

1. Get the facts

Your options

- Have surgery for hammer, claw, or mallet toes.
- Try nonsurgical treatments for hammer, claw, or mallet toes.

Key points to remember

- Consider surgery if your toe is too painful, if your deformity is too great, or if you can't easily do your daily activities.
- Your expectations will play a big role in how you feel about the results of surgery. Surgery may not help how your foot looks.
- Your toe problems may come back after surgery. This is more likely if you keep wearing the kinds of shoes that cause toe problems.
- Instead of having surgery, you can try wearing shoes with lots of room for your toes and using pads and supports in the shoe for protection and comfort. Doing toe exercises can help straighten your toes and make your toes more flexible.

FAQs

What are hammer, claw, and mallet toes?

Hammer, claw, and mallet toes (see figure in appendix) are toes that do not have the right shape. They may look odd or may hurt, or both. Tight shoes are the most common cause of these toe problems.

- A hammer toe is a toe that bends down toward the floor at the middle toe joint. It usually
happens in the second toe. This causes the middle toe joint to rise up. Hammer toes often occur with bunions.

- **Claw toe** often happens in the four smaller toes at the same time. The toes bend up at the joints where the toes and the foot meet. They bend down at both the middle joints and at the joints nearest the tip of the toes. This causes the toes to curl down toward the floor.

- **A mallet toe** often happens to the second toe, but it may happen in the other toes as well. The toe bends down at the joint closest to the tip of the toe.

**What are the risks of hammer, claw, or mallet toe?**

Hammer, claw, and mallet toes can cause discomfort and pain and may make it hard to walk. Shoes may rub on your toes, causing pain, blisters, calluses or corns, or sores. Sores can become infected and lead to cellulitis or osteomyelitis, especially if you have diabetes or peripheral arterial disease. If you have one of these health problems and sores develop, contact your doctor.

**What is nonsurgical treatment for hammer, claw, and mallet toes?**

You can treat hammer, claw, and mallet toes at home by doing the following:

- **Wear roomy shoes.**
- **Use pads and supports** for protection and comfort.
- **Do toe exercises.** These will make the toe muscles stronger and more flexible.
- **Limit activities** that cause pain.
- **Use over-the-counter medicine** to treat pain.

**What kinds of surgery are done for hammer, claw, and mallet toes?**

If your hammer, claw, or mallet toe gets worse, or if nonsurgical treatment does not help your pain, you may think about surgery. The type of surgery you choose depends on how severe your condition is and whether the toe joint is fixed (has no movement) or flexible (has some movement). A fixed toe joint often requires surgery to be straightened. A flexible toe joint can sometimes be straightened without surgery.

Surgery choices include:

- Phalangeal head resection (arthroplasty), in which the surgeon removes part of the toe bone.
- Joint fusion (arthrodesis), in which the surgeon removes part of the joint, letting the toe bones grow together (fuse).
- Cutting supporting tissue or moving tendons in the toe joint.

How well surgery works depends on what type of surgery you have, how experienced your surgeon is, and how badly your toes are affected.

Surgery may not help how your foot looks. And your toe problems may also come back after surgery. This is more likely if you keep wearing the kinds of shoes that cause toe problems.
Your expectations will play a large role in how you feel about the results of surgery. If you are only having surgery to improve the way your foot looks, you may not be happy with how it turns out.

**Why might your doctor recommend surgery?**

Generally, surgery is used only if your symptoms do not improve with nonsurgical treatment.

Think about surgery if you have:

- Bad toe pain that interferes with your daily activities, and nonsurgical treatments have not worked.
- A badly deformed foot that interferes with your daily activities.
- A fixed toe joint deformity. This condition typically requires surgery to relieve pain and correct the deformity.

Surgery may not be an option if your toe deformity is caused by a problem with your nervous system or if you have a condition that affects your blood vessels, such as diabetes.

### 2. Compare your options

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Have surgery for hammer, claw, or mallet toes</th>
<th>Try other treatment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>What is usually involved?</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• You can go home the same day as your surgery.</td>
<td>• Try wearing shoes with more room and using pads and supports to cushion painful toes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• You will not be able to stand or walk for long periods for at least 3 to 6 weeks. You will need to take some time off work, but how long depends on things like the type of surgery you have, whether your usual activity requires certain shoes or not, and what type of work you do.</td>
<td>• Do toe exercises to make your toes stronger and more flexible.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• You may need crutches for a few days.</td>
<td>• Take over-the-counter medicine for pain.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>What are the benefits?</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Relieves pain</td>
<td>• Provides room for the toe to straighten and muscles to get stronger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Allows you to walk more comfortably</td>
<td>• Relieves pain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Decreases the risk that you will have skin problems where the hammer, claw, or mallet toe rubs on your shoe</td>
<td>• Avoids risk of surgery, including swelling and numbness</td>
</tr>
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</table>
What are the risks and side effects?

- Healing may take a long time.
- You may have swelling that doesn't go away, numbness, or a limited range of motion in the affected toe.
- Surgery may not change how your foot looks.
- Your toe problems may come back after surgery, especially if you keep wearing shoes that cause toe problems.
- All surgery has risks, including infection and problems related to anesthesia and bleeding.
- If your toe problem is very bad, you may not get relief from your pain.
- Other treatment may not correct the toe deformity.

Personal stories

Are you interested in what others decided to do? Many people have faced this decision. These personal stories may help you decide.

Personal stories about surgery for hammer, claw, or mallet toes

These stories are based on information gathered from health professionals and consumers. They may be helpful as you make important health decisions.

"Others in my family have hammer toes, so I guess I shouldn't be surprised about getting one, especially after my doctor told me that wearing high-heeled shoes contributes to their development. I guess I didn't realize how much shoes can affect your feet. My doctor suggested wearing shoes with a lower heel and more room in the toes, as this could help my foot pain. I'm going to give up high heels and see if this helps with the pain. I don't really want to have surgery."

— Diane, age 54

"I have a claw toe that is just killing me. The only time it doesn't hurt is when I'm barefoot, but I can't live my life like that. I gave up high heels and always wear the roomiest shoes possible, and it still hurts. I'm to the point where the pain is keeping me from doing things I used to do. I'm going to have surgery to relieve the pain."

— Franny, age 47

"I like to run 5 or 6 days a week. My hammer toe hurts when I run, but I have cut my running shoe so that my toe has room when I run. I also changed my work shoes to a softer leather that doesn't hurt my toe. I know I may need surgery in the future, but I've found a way to delay it for now."

— Carlos, age 41
"I waitress part-time to make extra money, and I also really enjoy interacting with the people at my job. The only bad part is that after a night on the job I have a hammer toe that really hurts. I've gone from high heels to lower heels, but I really can't do anything else because my boss doesn't want me in tennis shoes or something more comfortable. I guess I could quit, but I don't want to. My doctor tells me that surgery can help with my hammer toe, but it could come back if I keep wearing heels. I'm going to give surgery a try, talk to my boss again, and see what happens."

— Mary, age 50

3. What matters most to you?

Your personal feelings are just as important as the medical facts. Think about what matters most to you in this decision, and show how you feel about the following statements.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reasons to choose surgery for hammer, claw, or mallet toes</th>
<th>Reasons to choose other treatment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I want to do everything I can to fix my toe problem, even if my problem could return after surgery.</td>
<td>I don't want to have surgery if it might not fix my problem.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More important</td>
<td>Equally important</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I want to have surgery even if it won't improve the way my foot looks.</th>
<th>The only reason I would have surgery is if it would improve the way my foot looks.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>More important</td>
<td>Equally important</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I've already tried wearing roomy shoes, pads, and cushions on my toes. These treatments have not worked.</th>
<th>I haven't tried wearing roomy shoes, pads, and cushions on my toes. These treatments might work for me.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>More important</td>
<td>Equally important</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
More important | Equally important | More important
---|---|---
I'm in pain and can't do daily activities. | My pain isn't too bad, and I'm still able to do daily activities. |

More important | Equally important | More important
---|---|---
I'm not too concerned about the risks involved in foot surgery. | I'm worried about the risks involved in foot surgery. |

More important | Equally important | More important
---|---|---
My other important reasons: | My other important reasons: |
Having surgery | Trying other treatment |
5. What else do you need to make your decision?

Check the facts

1. Surgery is a good choice because it will make my foot look better.
   - True
   - False
   - I'm not sure

   You are right. Surgery may not help the way your foot looks.

2. My toe problems could come back even if I have surgery.
   - True
     - False
     - I'm not sure

   You're right. Your toe problems could come back after surgery. This is more likely if you keep wearing the kinds of shoes that cause toe problems.

3. Wearing pads in my shoes and changing the kinds of shoes I wear may relieve my pain.
   - True
     - False
     - I'm not sure

   That's right. You can treat toe problems by wearing roomy shoes, pads, and cushions for your toes. Doing toe exercises will also help stretch and strengthen your toes.

Decide what's next

1. Do you understand the options available to you?
   - Yes
   - No

2. Are you clear about which benefits and side effects matter most to you?
   - Yes
   - No
3. Do you have enough support and advice from others to make a choice?
   ○ Yes
   ○ No

**Certainty**

1. How sure do you feel right now about your decision?

Not sure at all  Somewhat sure  Very sure

2. Check what you need to do before you make this decision.
   ○ I'm ready to take action.
   ○ I want to discuss the options with others.
   ○ I want to learn more about my options.

3. Use the following space to list questions, concerns, and next steps.

**Credits**

By Healthwise Staff
Primary Medical Reviewer William H. Blahd, Jr., MD, FACEP - Emergency Medicine
Specialist Medical Reviewer Gavin W.G. Chalmers, DPM - Podiatry and Podiatric Surgery

**Appendix**

**Topic Images**

Figure 1

Hammer toe
A hammer toe occurs when a toe (usually the second toe) bends down at the middle toe joint (proximal interphalangeal joint, or PIP joint). The toe may bend up at the joint where the toe and foot meet (metatarsophalangeal joint, or MTP joint), causing the middle toe joint to be raised slightly. There may also be a deformity at the distal interphalangeal joint (DIP joint).
Claw toe often affects all toes at the same time (except the big toe), causing them to bend downward at both the middle joints (PIP joints) and the joints nearest the tip (distal interphalangeal joint, or DIP joint), so that the toes curl down. The toes bend up at the joints where the toes and the foot meet (MTP joint).

Figure 3

Mallet toe

![Mallet toe illustration](http://www.nucleusinc.com)

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A mallet toe often affects the longest toe (generally the second toe), but it may affect the other toes as well. The toe bends down at the joint closest to the tip (DIP joint).

Note: The "printer friendly" document will not contain all the information available in the online document. Some information (e.g. cross-references to other topics, definitions or medical illustrations) is only available in the online version.