

# Understanding Mallet, Hammer & Claw Toes



# What Causes Mallet, Hammer, and Claw Toes?

Mallet, hammer, and claw toes are most often caused by wearing shoes that are too short or heels that are too high. This jams the toes against the front of the shoe and causes one or more joints to bend. Rarely, disease can cause the joints in the toes to bend. Mallet, hammer, and claw toes are among the most common toe problems. They occur most often in the longest of the four smaller toes.



## Symptoms

You may feel pain in the toe or in the ball of your foot. A **corn** (a hard growth of skin on the top of the toe) may form where the toe rubs against the top of the shoe. Or a **callus** (a hard growth of skin on the bottom of the foot) may form under the tip of the toe or on the ball of the foot. Corns and calluses can also be painful.

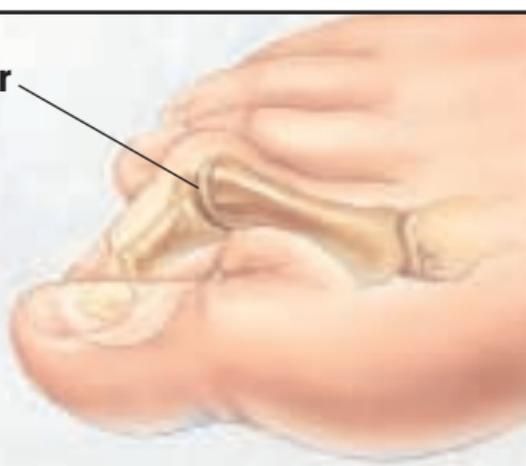
# Inside Your Toes

There are three bones in each of your four smaller toes. Where two bones connect is called a **joint**. Normally the toes lie flat. But pressure on the toes or the front of the foot can cause one or more joints to bend. This curls the toe. Toes that stay curled are called **mallet toes**, **hammer toes**, or **claw toes**, depending on which joints are bent.

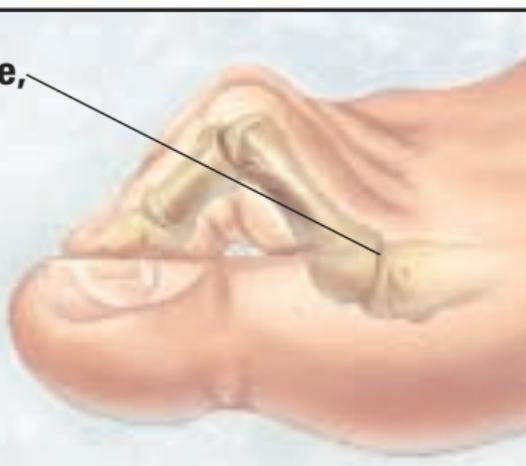
**With a mallet toe**, the joint nearest the tip of the toe is bent.



**With a hammer toe**, the middle joint is bent.



**With a claw toe**, the joint at the base of the toe is bent up. The middle joint is bent down.

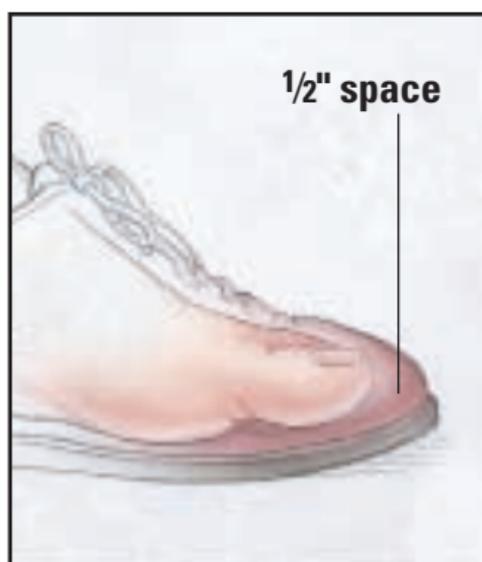


# Diagnosis and Treatment

Your doctor will examine your feet carefully. He or she will check for corns and calluses and bend your toes to see if the joints are still flexible. You may also have x-rays to rule out arthritis. Buying shoes with more room in the toes, filing down corns and calluses, and padding the toe most often relieve the pain. If these steps don't work, you may need surgery to straighten the toes.

## Shoes

Buy low-heeled shoes with plenty of room in the front. This keeps the toes from being jammed against the end of the shoe. It also keeps the shoe from rubbing the tops of the toes.



## Corns and Calluses

To file down a corn or callus, soak your foot in warm water. This softens the hard skin. Dry your foot. Then gently rub the corn or callus with a pumice stone or nail file.



## Pads and Splints

If you still have pain, you may need to put a pad or splint on the toe. This helps take pressure off the painful corn or callus.

**For a mallet toe,** you can put a gel pad on the toe. This keeps the tip of the toe from rubbing against the bottom of the shoe.



**For a hammer or claw toe,** you can put a felt or foam pad over the bent joint. This keeps the toe from rubbing on the top of the shoe.



**For a hammer or claw toe that is still flexible,** you can put a splint on the toe. This keeps it straight so it doesn't rub on the top of the shoe.



# Preventing Future Problems

To prevent future toe problems, wear low-heeled shoes with plenty of room across the toes. You can also do exercises to strengthen your toes and keep the joints from getting stiff.

## Marble Pickup

Put a marble on a carpeted floor. Curl your toes over the marble and pick it up. Release. Repeat 20 times.



## Toe Pulls

Place a large, sturdy rubber band around all 5 toes. Spread your toes out. Hold for 5 seconds. Then release. Repeat 10 times.



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