

What is a bunion?

A bunion is where the big toe (hallux) moves towards the second toe at an angle. However, not everyone with this displacement will develop the joint swelling and bone overgrowth that characterises a bunion.

Bunions form when the first metatarsal bone and big toe are displaced and the big toe moves towards the other toes. As the big toe moves towards the smaller toes, it may become displaced under or over the second toe. The displacement of these two foot bones causes part of the bone on the inside portion of the forefoot/ to stick out and the skin over this area often becomes inflamed from rubbing against the shoe, often forming a callus.

The joint contains a small sac (bursa) filled with fluid that cushions the bones and helps the joint to move smoothly. When a bunion forms, this sac becomes inflamed and thickened and the swelling in the joint causes additional pain and pressure in the toe.

Why do bunions develop?

It is unclear why bunions develop but often there is a heredity tendency to have a weakness of this joint. People with conditions that affect joints, for example, osteoarthritis or rheumatoid arthritis, are also more likely to develop a bunion.

Other possible causes include repetitive strain injury, ill-fitting footwear, abnormal foot function, excessive pronation (feet rolling inwards), weak foot ligaments and trauma or injury to the foot.

What symptoms and problems can I expect with a bunion?

- Pain
- Inflammation and swelling which could lead to a bursa over the bunion
- The joint displacement can make finding shoes wide enough to accommodate the joint difficult
- Arthritis in the big toe
- The second toe can be pushed up resulting in a hammer toe
- Hard skin around the bunion
- Leg and back pain due to altered ways of walking (biomechanics)

What can I do to reduce these symptoms?

Wear suitable footwear tied around the mid-foot with laces or straps. The soles should be cushioned and wide enough to accommodate your bunion/s. Soft leather uppers with no seams will also accommodate your foot shape and be more comfortable.

If your second toe is starting to push up, the front of the shoe should also have a deep enough toe box so the toe does not rub on the top of the shoe. Avoid wearing high heels and footwear that is too tight. Shoes can also be stretched to your foot shape at shoe repairers. Your local podiatrist can advise on suitable makes and styles.

Being overweight can increase the force on the joints and muscles in your body and therefore increase joint pain: Losing weight can help to reduce this pain.

Padding and protective covers around the bunion can reduce pressure and help prevent inflammation and swelling, providing the correct footwear is worn. Night splints for bunions might also provide some comfort.

Ice (or a bag of frozen vegetables) placed in a tea towel over the joint for about five minutes should help to reduce any inflammation and over the counter painkillers can be taken for pain relief.

When do I need to see a podiatrist?

The advice above will not prevent the development of a bunion but should ease the symptoms. If, however, there is little improvement after self-treatment, it is recommended you see a private HCPC registered podiatrist specialising in biomechanics.

The podiatrist will watch how you walk and will check how your legs and feet function. You may be given stretching exercises and/or orthoses, (shoe inserts) as part of the treatment.

Some patients may be sent to an orthotist for specialised footwear at this stage, especially if they have other conditions or have developed a bunion that is too large for standard fitting shoes.

Further treatments

Surgery may be required if the above interventions have not improved pain levels. Your doctor will advise which treatments are most suitable.

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