

Patient information

Lesser Toe deformities *Problems with the small toes*

This leaflet is intended to provide information about Lesser toe deformities and how to make you more comfortable.

It will inform you of treatment's and help you choose which option is best for you.

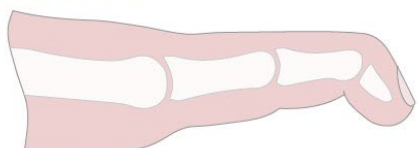
What are they?

The small toes are important for walking and help push the foot off the floor. They share this role with the big toe and the ball of the foot. Sometimes they lose their straight shape and can become floppy or stiff. They are commonly known as clawed, mallet or hammered toe deformities, but they may also under or overlap adjacent toes.

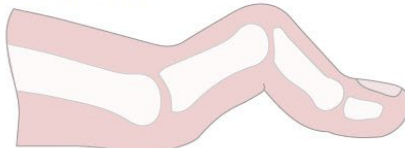
They can be concerning due to their shape and become painful, affecting your daily activity, work or exercise.

Treatment is simple and includes making changes to your footwear, lifestyle, exercises, using insoles or toe spacers all without need to see a GP or a specialist.

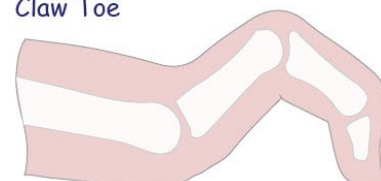
Mallet Toe



Hammer Toe



Claw Toe



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Why do they become deformed?

Toe deformities occur when pressure upon toes is more than the joints, ligaments and tendons can resist.

Injury or medical conditions such as arthritis, may weaken muscles of the foot, which then lose coordination with other muscles. Stronger muscles pull harder than others, causing abnormal joint bending and toe deformity.

Sometimes, joints and ligaments at the base of the toes become injured, allowing toes to drift sideways and splay apart. Short or longer toes may be normal or happen after foot surgery.

Poorly fitting shoes may press upon toes or force them into the tip of the shoe, restricting normal movement and causing weakness.

This information covers:

Symptoms of lesser toe deformities

Causes of lesser toe deformities

Treating lesser toe deformities

Exercises

When to see your GP A&E or Podiatrist

Symptoms of Lesser Toe deformities

- Structural and postural changes of smaller toes
- Pain underneath the ball of the foot
- Pain to the top, underneath, sides and end of toes
- Toes that rub together, causing blisters, hard skin or open wounds.
- Pain wearing shoes.
- Changes in the appearance of toenails.
- One or multiple toes may be affected.

Causes of toe deformities

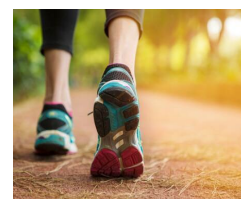
- High-heeled and narrow shoes increase pressure upon toes, causing deformity and skin lesions.
- Weakness of muscles, tendons and ligaments that stabilise and move toes, cause muscle imbalance and toe deformity.
- High arched, flat feet or stiff ankles may increase the risk of toe deformities.
- Injury to the ball of the foot or toes
- Weight gain, low exercise levels and age-related changes may increase the risk of problems with toe deformities.
- Medical conditions such as arthritis, abnormal neurology, diabetes or poor circulation may cause and aggravate existing toe deformities.

Treatment of lesser toe deformities

Lifestyle

Keep active and eat a healthy diet to avoid unwanted weight gain which may aggravate toe pain.

Swap high impact activities such as running for low impact exercise like swimming or cycling. Take rest breaks if you stand a lot.



Pain relief

(Always ask your pharmacist before taking medication)

Paracetamol can help mild to moderate pain.

Footwear

Shoes should be well cushioned, have low heels and be wide enough for toes to move comfortably. A stiff soled or rocker soled shoe can reduce pain under the ball of the foot.



Insoles / pads

Insoles with arch and metatarsal support (metatarsal dome pads) are helpful for pain under the ball of the foot and toes. These can be bought cheaply online, from chemists or sports shops.

Gel pads can be helpful for pain under the ball of the foot.

Suppliers of insoles or gel pads can be found here:

<https://www.shoeinsoles.co.uk/>

<https://www.amazon.co.uk> (search for Canonbury products)

<https://www.healthandcare.co.uk/foot-hub.html>



Skin problems

Hard skin should be applied with moisturising cream daily and gently treated with regular use of a foot file. Silicone gel toe sleeves are useful for toes with hard skin in-between or upon the ends of toes. These are available in chemists or sourced from the insole suppliers listed above.

Alternatively, contact a local private podiatrist for hard skin treatment.

(chiropody or podiatry is not available on the NHS locally, unless you have a serious medical problem such as diabetes or experience open wounds on your feet)



Exercises

These may reduce pain and should be performed daily at home prior to seeking specialist opinion.

Ankle Range of motion



AIM: Improve ankle motion and reduce pressure under the ball of foot during walking

1. Lean against a wall.
2. Keep feet straight and heels flat to the ground.
3. Hold for 30 - 60s. Swap feet and repeat.
4. Avoid bouncing forwards and backwards.

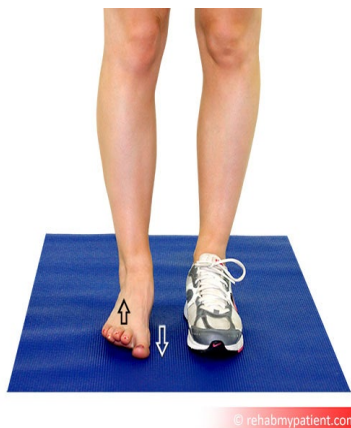
Repeat 5 times / day over 3 months

Foot Strengthening



AIM: Strengthen muscles which move and keep toes straight

1. Perform each movement until your toes become tired, or for 1 minute
2. Repeat 5 times
3. Perform 3 days / week



What if pain isn't getting better?

- If pain persists despite advice and attempts to self-manage, it may be necessary to speak to a podiatrist.

If non-surgical measures are not settling symptoms, you may be referred onwards to speak with an Orthopaedic Foot & Ankle Consultant, for a surgical opinion. To better understand toe surgery, its management is described here:

<https://www.esht.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/0257.pdf>

Summary & Contact information

This leaflet aims to provide you with information regarding deformities of the smaller toes and your treatment options.

Once you receive this leaflet you have six months to consider your options, if no contact is made from you to our service after this time, no appointment will be made for you.

You should consider what options are best for you?

1. Self-management: utilising the non-surgical treatments described above has helped you maintain comfort and satisfactory function.

This approach requires no further appointments.

2. You feel you would benefit with further advice and wish to discuss your toe condition with a podiatrist. Contact us: Tel: 0300 1314536 or Email: eshtr.PodiatryEnquiries@nhs.net

3. Surgery: you have exhausted non-surgical treatments and wish to be considered for a surgical opinion, you may complete this form: <https://eastsussexmsk.nhs.uk/gethelp/>

A Foot and Ankle advanced practitioner will assess you, refer for investigations e.g., X-ray, if required, and discuss your concerns, before referring onwards to see an orthopaedic consultant. Please note we cannot guarantee surgery.

See a GP if:

- You have a very high temperature or feel hot and shivery.
- Your groin feels tender and painful (swollen glands), this can be a sign of infection.
- Pain is severe or stopping you from working and normal activities.
- You have tingling or numbness in your feet.
- You have diabetes – foot problems can be more serious if you have diabetes.

Go to A & E if you had an injury and feel:

- Severe pain in the ankle or foot
- Faint, dizzy or sick from pain.
- You heard a crack or grinding noise during trauma.
- Unable to walk more than 2 or 3 steps.
- Your leg, ankle or foot has changed shape.
- You have developed a red, hot or swollen foot in the presence of Diabetes.

Sources of information

<https://www.bofas.org.uk/Patient-Information/Lesser-Toes>

Hadlow, G. 2024. Lesser toe pathway. East Sussex MSK service

<http://orthodesignbc.com/common-foot-pathologies/toe-deformities/>

Important information

This patient information is for guidance purposes only and is not provided to replace professional clinical advice from a qualified practitioner.

Your comments

We are always interested to hear your views about our leaflets. If you have any comments, please contact the patient experience team on 0300 131 4784 or esh-tr.patientexperience@nhs.net

Hand hygiene

We are committed to maintaining a clean, safe environment. Hand hygiene is very important in controlling infection. Alcohol gel is widely available at the patient bedside for staff use and at the entrance of each clinical area for visitors to clean their hands before and after entering.

Other formats

If you require any of our leaflets in alternative formats, such as large print or alternative languages, please contact the Equality and Human Rights Department on 0300 131 4434 or esh-tr.AccessibleInformation@nhs.net

After reading this information are there any questions you would like to ask? Please list below and ask your nurse or doctor.

Reference

The following clinicians have been consulted and agreed this patient information:
Graeme Hadlow (East Sussex Healthcare NHS Trust) MSK Advanced Practitioner

The Clinical Specialty/Unit that have agreed this patient information leaflet:
Podiatry – Community Health and Integrated Care

Next review date: April 2027
Responsible clinician/author: Graeme Hadlow

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