



# All About Bunions

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## **Do You Have Bunions?**

Even though bunions are a common foot deformity, there are misconceptions about them. A lot of people suffer unnecessarily from a painful bunion for years before seeking treatment.

## **What Is a Bunion?**

Bunions are normally described as a bump on the side of the big toe. But a bunion is more than that. The bump that is seen on the side of the foot is actually a reflection of changes in the bony framework in the front part of the foot. With a bunion, the big toe swings toward the second toe, instead of pointing straight ahead. This throws the bones out of alignment, producing the bunion's "bump."

Bunions are a progressive disorder. They start with a leaning of the big toe, gradually changing the angle of the bones. Over the years this slowly produces the characteristic bump, which continues to become increasingly prominent. Usually the symptoms of bunions appear at later stages. Ironically, some people never develop symptoms.

## **What Causes a Bunion?**

Bunions are most often caused by an inherited faulty mechanical structure of the foot. The bunion itself is not inherited, but certain foot types that make a person more likely to develop a bunion are inherited.

Although wearing shoes that crowd the toes won't actually cause bunions in the first place, it sometimes makes the deformity get progressively worse. That means you may experience symptoms sooner. The bigger the bunion gets, the more it hurts to walk.

## **Symptoms**

Symptoms occur most often when wearing shoes that crowd the toes--shoes with a tight toe box or high heels. Women's shoes often are too small and squeeze the toes together. They often have high heels that further throw off the biomechanics of the foot. That is why 9 out of 10 bunions happen to women. In addition, spending long periods of time on your feet can aggravate the symptoms of bunions.

General symptoms at the site of the bunion may include:

- Pain or soreness
- Inflammation and redness
- A burning sensation
- Possibly some numbness

Some other conditions which may occur with bunions include, sores between the toes, ingrown toenail, calluses on the big toe and restricted motion of the toe.

### **Diagnosis**

The diagnosis of bunions is very apparent--you can see the prominence at the base of the big toe or side of the foot. However, to fully evaluate your condition, the podiatric or orthopedic foot and ankle surgeon may take x-rays to determine the degree of the deformity and assess the changes that have occurred.

Bunions are a progressive disorder. They don't go away, and will usually get worse over time. But not all cases are alike--some bunions progress more rapidly than others. Once your podiatric or orthopedic surgeon has evaluated your particular case, a treatment plan can be developed that is suited to your needs.

### **Treatment**

Sometimes observation of the bunion is all that's needed. A periodic office evaluation and x-ray examination can determine if your bunion deformity is advancing, thereby reducing your chance of irreversible damage to the joint. In many other cases, however, some type of treatment is needed.

Early treatments are conservative and aimed at easing the pain of bunions. But they won't reverse the deformity itself.

Initial treatments include:

- Changes in footwear.** Wearing the right kind of shoes is very important. Choose shoes that have a wide toe box and good supportive arches. Avoid shoes with pointed toes or high heels which may aggravate the condition.
- Padding.** Pads placed over the area of the bunion can help decrease pain. You can get bunion pads from your podiatric or orthopedic surgeon or purchase them at a drug store.
- Activity modifications.** Limit the activities that cause your bunion pain, including standing for long periods of time.
- Medications.** Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), such as ibuprofen, may help to relieve pain.
- Icing.** Applying an ice pack several times a day helps reduce inflammation and pain.
- Injection therapy.** It is rare that injections are used in bunion treatment, injections of corticosteroids may be useful in treating the inflamed bursa (fluid-filled sac located in a joint) sometimes seen with bunions.
- Orthotic devices.** In some cases, custom orthotic devices may be provided by the podiatric surgeon. These will not correct the deformity, but can help to slow its progression.

### **When Is Surgery Needed?**

When the pain of a bunion interferes with daily activities, it's time to discuss surgical options with your podiatric or orthopedic surgeon. Together you can decide if surgery is best for you.

Recent advances in surgical techniques have led to a very high success rate in treating bunions.

There are a variety of surgical procedures that are performed to treat bunions. These procedures are designed to do several things including: remove the "bump" of bone, correct the changes in the bony structure of the foot, as well as correct soft tissue changes that may also have occurred. The ultimate goal of these corrections is the elimination of pain.

In selecting the procedure or combination of procedures for your particular case, the podiatric or orthopedic surgeon will take into consideration the extent of your deformity based on the x-ray findings, your age, your activity level, and other factors. The length of the recovery period will vary, depending on the procedure or procedures performed.

