footprints

An informational newsletter for patients of APMA member podiatrists

Winter 2008

'Tis the Season— Handle Bunions With Care

The holidays are all about spending time with friends and family, but if your feet hurt, you certainly can't be the life of the party. With a bunion to worry about, you may not be able to enjoy all the pleasure that the holidays can bring—and the dancing too. However, there are ways to "beat the blues" when dealing with bunions, and taking some of these steps can bring you relief—at least from your foot pain.

A bunion is an enlargement of the joint at the base of the big toe—the metatarsophalangeal (MTP) joint—that forms when the bone or tissue at the big toe joint moves out of place. This forces the toe to bend toward the others, causing an often painful lump of bone on the foot. Since this joint carries much of the body's weight while walking, bunions can cause extreme pain if left untreated. The MTP joint itself may become stiff and sore, making wearing shoes sometimes difficult or impossible.

Bunions are a symptom of faulty foot development and are usually caused by the way we walk, our inherited foot type, our shoes, or other reasons. Although bunions tend to run in families, it is the foot type that is passed down—not the bunion. Other causes of bunions are foot injuries, neuromuscular disorders, or congenital deformities. People who suffer from flat feet or low arches are also prone to developing these problems, as are arthritic patients and those with inflammatory joint disease.

Treatment options vary with the type and severity of each bunion, although identifying the deformity early in its development is important in avoiding surgery. Podiatric medical attention should be sought at the first indication of pain or discomfort because, left untreated, bunions tend to get larger and more painful, making non-surgical treatment less of an option. The primary goal of most early treatment options is to relieve pressure on the bunion and halt the progression of the joint deformity. A podiatric physician may recommend any one or more of the following treatments: padding and taping to minimize pain, medication to ease the pain and inflammation, physical therapy (such as ultrasound), and orthotics (shoe inserts) to control foot function and reduce symptoms.

When conservative treatments fail or the bunion progresses past the threshold for such options, podiatric surgery may become necessary to relieve pressure and repair the toe joint. Several surgical procedures are available to the podiatric physician. The surgery will remove the bony enlargement, restore a more appropriate alignment of the toe joint, and relieve pain.

A simple bunionectomy, in which only the bony prominence is removed, may be used for the less severe deformity. Severe bun-ions may require a more involved procedure, which includes cutting the bone and realigning the joint.

Recuperation takes time, and swelling and some discomfort are common for several weeks following surgery. Pain, however, is easily managed with medications prescribed by your podiatric physician. For more information, talk to your podiatrist and find out what your options are before you spend the season thinking of your feet, and not your family and friends. •

Austin Foot and Ankle Specialists
(512) 328-8900
5000 Bee Caves Road, Suite 202, Austin, TX 78746
www.austinfootandankle.com

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"Hammer Time"

When M.C. Hammer sang his now infamous song, he wasn't talking about your feet. But hammertoes, a condition seen frequently in both men and women, are nothing to sing about and can keep those who suffer from the condition from participating in normal activities.

A hammertoe is formed from an abnormal balance of the muscles in the toes. This causes increased pressures on the tendons and joints of the toe, leading to the contracture or bending of the toe at the first joint of the digit, called the proximal interphalangeal joint. This bending causes the toe to appear like an upside-down V when looked at from the side. Any toe can be involved, but the condition usually affects the second through fifth toes, known as the lesser digits.

A visit to your podiatrist can be the first step to relief. The podiatrist will first determine what type of hammertoes you have—either flexible hammertoes, which are less serious because they can be diagnosed and treated while still in the developmental state, or rigid hammertoes, which are more developed and more serious. Rigid hammertoes can be seen in patients who wait too long to seek professional treatment for example, or in patients with severe arthritis. The tendons in a rigid hammertoe become tight and the joint misaligned and immobile, making surgery the usual course of treatment.

The treatment options vary with the type and severity of each hammertoe, although identifying the deformity early in its development is important to avoid surgery. Your podiatric physician will examine and X-ray the affected area and recommend a treatment plan specific to your condition. Your doctor may recommend

- Padding and Taping – Often this is the first step in a treatment plan. Padding the hammertoe prominence minimizes pain and allows you to continue a normal, active life. Taping may change the imbalance around the toes and thus relieve the stress and pain.
- Medication – Anti-inflammatory drugs and cortisone injections can be prescribed to ease acute pain and inflammation caused by the joint deformity.
- Orthotic Devices – Custom shoe inserts made by your podiatrist may be useful in controlling foot function. An orthotic device may reduce symptoms and prevent the worsening of the hammertoe deformity.

If these treatments are not effective, several surgical procedures are also available to the podiatric physician. For less severe deformities, the surgery will remove the bony prominence and restore normal alignment of the toe joint, thus relieving pain. Severe hammertoes, which are not fully reducible, may require more complex surgical procedures.

Hammertoes are common and don't need to be a pain. Since we all know that our feet aren't supposed to hurt, finding out more about why they do can make us more likely to want to sing—and dance. •

APMA Seal of Acceptance: Your Guide to Great Gifts this Season

The American Podiatric Medical Association's (APMA) Seal of Acceptance/Approval Program recognizes products that have been found beneficial to foot health and of significant value when used in a consistently applied program of daily foot care and regular professional treatment. Some of the best gift choices to consider are listed below. In addition, you may want to check with your podiatrist for his or her recommendations this holiday season.

- **Sole Savior's SOS Safe Salon Pedicure Kit** – Give this great kit to any pedicure enthusiast and you'll ensure their comfort and their safety as well. www.solesavior.com
- **Heaven4Toes' Products** – Make every step a walk in the clouds and enjoy your favorite activities in divine comfort. www.heaven4toes.com
- **Injinji Footwear, Inc.'s Performance Series Tetratsok** – For the athlete on your list, these socks protect, prevent blisters, and out-perform any ordinary tube closed sport sock. www.injinji.com
- **See Kai Run's toddler footwear** – For baby gifts, these little shoes can't be beat. They come in hip, urban styles and modern color palettes. www.seekairun.com
- **FitFlops** – For vacation or those living in warmer climates, these flip flops are all the rage this year. Get them before they disappear. www.thefitflop.com •

For more Seal information visit **www.apma.org/seal**

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AMERICAN PODIATRIC MEDICAL ASSOCIATION
9312 Old Georgetown Road, Bethesda, MD 20814-1621
• www.apma.org •