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Hammertoes or Claw Toes

Hammertoes are caused by a muscle imbalance in the foot as a result of flatfeet, traumatic injury, or disease of the toe joints, etc. The function is extremely complex comprised of six muscles, a hood apparatus/sling and many ligaments and joints for each toe. They all work together to control toe function. If there is any imbalance in the foot, the smaller muscles can be overpowered by the larger flexor and extensor muscles. If a foot is flat the flexor muscles can overpower the others because a flatfoot is longer than a foot with a normal arch. When the foot flattens and lengthens, greater than normal tension is exerted. The toes are not strong enough to resist this tension and they may be overpowered, resulting in one of two deformities a claw-toe or hammertoe. Incidence of toe deformities increases with age and ranges from about 2-20%. Claw toes and hammer-toes are approximately 5 times more common in women. In most cases, toe deformities are caused by a muscle imbalance in the foot. The toes can also be effected by systemic conditions that increase the risk include neuromuscular diseases i.e. multiple sclerosis, Charcot-Marie-Tooth, cerebral palsy, rheumatoid arthritis, psoriasis, diabetes. If left untreated, claw toes and hammertoes can become serious fixed deformities. In many cases, the inside of the shoe rubs against the bent toe joints, gradually causing painful corns and callus's to form on the tops of the toes. The metatarsal heads support the body weight and pressure calluses and open sores can develop on the sole of the foot. When deformities reach this stage, the toes are fixed in a bent position and cannot be easily straightened. I explained there are only a few conservative treatments including wider shoe with a wide toe box, accommodations and orthotics or routine debridements. If conservative treatment fails and the pain is recurrent and recalcitrant then it is time that surgical intervention should be considered. Surgery can be complicated, but if addressed early maybe a simple in office procedure requiring a shot to numb the toe and immediate weight bearing.