Overlapping toes

Overlapping toes are toes that turn in and lie on top of the toe next to them. They are also known as over-riding toes.

This condition can affect any toe, but it is most common in the second and little toes. If it's not corrected it can cause extreme irritation, pain, and calluses.

Toe deformities can happen at any age. They are relatively common among babies and very small children, but more common in older people.

Overlapping toes are either fixed (you can't move them back into the correct position) or correctable (you can manually move them).

What causes an overlapping toe?

Babies and children

In babies, it's thought two things can cause overlapping toes: genetics (meaning it runs in families), and the position of the baby in the womb.

Usually when a baby has overlapping toes, one or both of the parents also have overlapping toes; in these cases genetics is probably the cause. If neither of the parents has overlapping toes, it's probably the baby's position in the womb that caused it.

It's rare for children to outgrow overlapping toes, and the condition can gradually become worse if it's not treated. Flexible overlapping toes can become fixed, and fixed overlapping toes can become more painful and lead to problems such as corns and calluses.

Babies can also have another condition called curly toes. This involves the third, fourth, and fifth toes of both feet curling under the foot, rather than one lying on top of the other. This is usually not painful, and the condition usually fixes itself by the time the child is 4 years old.

Adults

Some people gradually develop overlapping toes. This can happen because of foot problems like arthritis and bunions, untreated injuries like broken toes, or shoes that squeeze their toes or have high heels.

How can I avoid getting overlapping toes?

You can't avoid them if you are born with them, but you can stop them from getting worse.

The most important thing is to make sure you wear shoes that fit you properly. Podiatrists suggest you get your feet measured properly. Then, when buying shoes:
Overlapping toes

- make sure there's a centimetre of space above your longest toe at the end of each shoe when you're standing
- shop at the end of the day, when your feet are the most swollen
- always try shoes on before you buy them, and make sure they are comfortable and have plenty of space. Shoe sizes vary by brand and are not a reliable guide
- make sure the top of the shoes doesn't rub against your toes
- avoid shoes with pointed toes
- buy wide shoes with good shock-absorbing soles.

When you buy shoes for a child, make sure they are fitted properly, especially at times when the child is growing rapidly.

**How are overlapping toes treated?**

As long as an overlapping toe isn't painful or affecting the way you walk it doesn't need to be treated. If it is painful or affecting the way you walk, treatment depends on whether it's correctable or fixed.

**Correctable**

If it's correctable, strapping your toes together so the overlapping toe is in the right position can help to ease any pain, gradually return the toe to the right alignment, and prevent calluses from forming. It can help to see a podiatrist or physiotherapist for some exercises to strengthen your foot muscles, or splinting if that is necessary. This can stop the overlapping toe from coming back after strapping has returned it to the correct position.

($) You will need to pay to see a private podiatrist or physiotherapist. You can find a podiatrist by searching on the Podiatry New Zealand website (www.podiatry.org.nz). You can find a physiotherapist by searching on the Physiotherapy New Zealand website (physiotherapy.org.nz).

**Fixed**

If your overlapping toe is fixed you may need special shoes with extra depth around the toe to ease any pressure.

It can help to consult a podiatrist to see if orthotics or toe protectors will help.

In the few cases where podiatry and physiotherapy don't help, people with overlapping toes may need surgery. If this applies to you, your GP will refer you to an orthopaedic (bone) surgeon.

($) Unless the problem is badly affecting your ability to walk you are unlikely to get surgery in the public health system and will have to pay to see a private orthopaedic surgeon.

*Written by HealthInfo clinical advisers. Endorsed by podiatry liaison, Canterbury DHB. March 2017.*