Corns & calluses

A corn or callus is an area of thickened skin that forms at pressure points over bony areas of your foot.

Too much pressure, usually with some friction, causes a corn or callus. So the skin thickens up to protect itself from the pressure. Corns and calluses are two of the most common problems that podiatrists see. The symptoms depend on where they are.

Too much pressure can be caused by:

- footwear that's too tight
- toe deformities, such as hammertoes
- bony areas that stick out
- problems with the way you walk (called a gait abnormality) or hold your body (called a biomechanical abnormality).

A corn is a cone-shaped mass of skin pointing down into your foot. A callus is a dispersed, or wider, area of thickened skin that does not have a centre like a corn.

There are two main types of corns.

- Hard corns are the most common. They are concentrated areas of dry and hardened skin and often happen on your little toe. They are sometimes called digital corns.
- Soft corns are white and rubbery. They can be extremely painful and tend to develop between your toes.

Corns can become infected and develop ulcers. This can be a serious complication for people with poor circulation, peripheral neuropathy and those who need special diabetes foot care.

Treating corns & calluses

You should never try to cut out a corn yourself, as you are likely to cut into your flesh and cause an infection. However, there are things you can do to help relieve the symptoms.

- Use a pumice stone or a foot file to rub away the thickened skin, a little at a time. Do this after you have soaked your foot in the bath for about 20 minutes, so your skin is softer. If you have diabetes, check with your podiatrist first if it is okay for you to do this. Make sure you don't mistake a verruca for a corn. If you file a verruca, it can spread to other parts of your foot.
- Buy foam or silicone wedges to help relieve the pressure if the corn is between your toes.
- Wear supportive shoes with a wide toe and a low heel.

If you have poor circulation or a long-term medical condition like diabetes or rheumatoid arthritis, it's not a good idea to use corn caps. This is because if you have frail skin or poor circulation, corn caps are very likely to cause an ulcer, which could become infected.
Getting help for corns & calluses

Your podiatrist will need to work out what is causing your corn or callus and what is the best way to manage it. If you have diabetes or poor circulation it is especially important to see a podiatrist. Your podiatrist is likely to consider several options for managing your corn or callus. These include:

- regular maintenance to keep the corn or callus small (this is usually painless)
- padding to ease pressure
- advice about footwear and how well it fits
- foot orthotics to relieve the pressure under your foot
- surgical correction of the bony area that may be causing the high pressure.

There is a cost for a consultation and treatment with a private podiatrist. The cost of orthotics can vary depending on your foot needs, ranging from $85 to $650.

HealthInfo recommends the following pages

- Podiatry NZ – Corns and calluses (www.podiatry.org.nz/c/Corns-and-Calluses)
  Information about corns and calluses and how to prevent them.
- Patient.info – Corns and calluses (patient.info/foot-care/corns-and-calluses)
  This page outlines the causes of corns and calluses and common treatments.
- DermNet NZ – Corns and calluses (www.dermnetnz.org/topics/corn-callus/)
  The language on this website is more technical than the above sites, however, this page has useful photographs of corns and calluses.

Written by Canterbury podiatrists. Adapted by HealthInfo clinical advisers. Last reviewed September 2019.