

Know your bunions

A bunion is a protuberance of bone or tissue around the toe joint. The enlargement occurs either at the base of the big toe or on the outside of the foot, at the base of the little toe (called a 'bunionette' or 'tailor's bunion').

Women are more frequently afflicted with bunions because of our inclination to put up with the discomforts of tight, pointed, confining shoes. Yet, paradoxically, there are bunion-afflicted people in Africa who have never even worn shoes! This would indicate that genetics also come into the story.

Bunions are an aesthetic problem, and they can also become a pain problem. Stuart McCowan, an Auckland orthopaedic surgeon specialising in foot and ankle surgery, talks about the only permanent cure for bunions - surgery.

"Bunion surgery is not a quick fix. It's usually four months before my patients begin to say they're glad they had the procedure. Pain is the only indication for surgery - we don't perform surgery for aesthetic reasons alone. As with any operation, healing takes 6 weeks - sometimes longer, because the feet are slower to heal than other parts of the body. Your foot or feet will be immobilised in a cast for the duration of healing, so you won't be jogging for a while. However, there's no reason why you can't maintain an exercise programme using a stationary cycle or rowing machine. In my experience, bunion surgery is considered successful by nearly all people who opt for it - but it's not to be taken lightly."

Stuart also shed some light on the business of living with bunions. While it's advisable to avoid tight shoes for most of the day, wearing frivolous shoes in the evening won't make your bunions worse. To see which shoes are best for every day wear, draw the outline of your bare foot on paper, then place a shoe over that outline. If the shoe is narrower than the outline, your bunion is likely to complain.

Finally, Stuart wants us all to remember that our feet get bigger as we age. Expect to increase your shoe size - don't keep cramming your poor toes into the size you wore as a 20 year old.