

Subungual Exostosis

What do I need to know?

What is a subungual exostosis?

A subungual exostosis is a small extra growth of bone which arises from the bone at the end of your toe. Usually this is the big toe but sometimes it involves the smaller toes. The bone forms under the toe nail (subungual means 'under the nail') which causes pressure and becomes uncomfortable. The pain can be made worse with shoes and can prevent participation in sporting activities. The growth of bone is completely benign. We are not sure what causes the extra bone to form but usually it affects young adults. Trauma (injury to the toe) is often said to cause these swellings but we have no proof that this is actually the case. Very occasionally it affects older people. The diagnosis is confirmed with an x-ray. The treatment involves a small operation to remove (excise) the extra growth of bone.



X-ray of big toe showing small outgrowth of bone (exostosis)

Do I need an operation?

Surgery is indicated when the symptoms are significantly impacting on your activities of daily living, interfering with your sleep and are not managed with simple measures such as painkillers, footwear modifications and insoles.

What does the operation involve?

The operation is usually a day-case procedure. It is usually carried out under a local anaesthetic (you are awake, but your toe is completely numb). You will receive an appointment to attend the preoperative assessment clinic a week or two before your operation date. Occasionally, patients prefer to have the surgery performed under a general anaesthetic. This is sometimes more suitable for younger patients. This will be discussed with you at the pre-operative assessment clinic. You will receive more details about your anaesthetic in an information booklet "You and your anaesthetic" when you attend the preoperative assessment clinic. Further details can be obtained at <https://rcoa.ac.uk/patient-information>.

With excision of a subungual exostosis operation, first of all the toenail is cut back or sometimes the toenail is removed completely. Then an incision is made over the bony swelling and the swelling is removed from the underlying bone. Usually the specimen is then sent to the pathology lab to confirm the diagnosis. Then, the skin incision is either stitched closed or left to heal from the base. The toe is covered with a dressing and a bandage and you will be given a sandal to wear home.

What happens after surgery?

You will be able to weight bear soon after your operation, but you will be very limited in walking for the first 2 weeks or so. The following is a guideline as to the expected recovery period:

- 1-2 weeks Bandage/rest/elevation (Review in OPD clinic or GP nurse clinic)
- 2 weeks return to work/return to driving
- 6 weeks return to activities

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What are the benefits of excision of subungual exostosis surgery?

The potential benefits from surgery are:

- A reduction in pain
- Remove bony swelling from under the toe nail
- Easier shoe fitting,
- An improvement in these factors may also have a positive impact on your mobility and allow you to return to activities.

Are there alternatives to the surgery?

Removal of the swelling is usually recommended as your symptoms are unlikely to improve. However your symptoms may not get worse. If you decide not to have an operation, you can manage your symptoms by changing your activity levels, using painkillers, changing footwear and applying padding.

Can I do nothing?

In general, this is not a life or limb threatening condition and surgery is not essential. Surgery can be done at anytime and we can continue to monitor your symptoms. If your situation was to worsen you can always contact us to arrange a further discussion with us.

Your operation may be carried out by a Podiatrist

This operation is one of the operations that may be carried out by a Podiatrist. Our Podiatrist has specialised in the care of foot problems for many years and has gained additional training to allow them to work as a member of the operating team. The Podiatrist is fully capable of performing this procedure to the highest standards and you will receive the same care provided by a surgeon.

What are the potential risks of surgery?

Most people benefit from this operation however, there are no guarantees regarding surgery. There are general risks of surgery: infection, blood clots, CRPS, mal/non-union of bone (see links) and specific risks related to this operation:

- Wound infection (7%)
- Bone infection (1%)
- Tender scar (5%)
- Numbness or sensitivity in the toe (5%)
- Residual pain despite surgery
- Worse foot pain
- Recurrent exostosis (10%)
- Problems with toenail/thickened toenail (10%)
- Complex regional pain syndrome (1%)
- DVT, PE (1%) (potentially life threatening)
- Amputation (0.01%)
- Death (0.001%)
- Need for further surgery (toenail surgery)
- Risk of patient dissatisfaction with the outcomes of surgery.

In the worst case, some of these risks may leave you worse off following surgery.

Smoking, other illnesses (such diabetes, rheumatoid arthritis) or drugs (steroids or blood thinning drugs) increase the risks of surgery.