

Weekend Doctor

By **DR. THOMAS F. VAIL**

Sure, they may look perfect on the screen, but Dan Akroyd and Ashton Kutcher have a physical imperfection caused by a birth defect that they freely talk about.

Birds, ducks and frogs have it. Have you guessed it? Yes, webbed toes!

Webbed toes is the common name for the medical term "syndactyly." Affecting the feet, it is characterized by the fusion of two or more digits of the feet.

This is normal in many birds, such as ducks; amphibians, such as frogs; and mammals, such as kangaroos. With evolution in humans, it is considered unusual, occurring in approximately one in 2,000 to 2,500 live births.

Syndactyly is quite normal in early fetal development, and generally the fingers and toes separate around week 16 of gestation.

However, sometimes this separation does not occur and babies are born with webbed fingers and toes. The second and third fingers and toes are most often affected.

This incomplete separation usually involves a connection of skin, but can sometimes also affect blood vessels, tendons, nerves and bones. The webbing connection may extend to the first joint or to the whole length of the digit.

Syndactyly does not usually affect a child's walking. If it does, corrective or reconstructive surgery is an option. The repair of webbed fingers and toes is generally done when a child is between six months and 24 months.

Genetics is not the only way you may get webbed feet. A burn victim's skin may melt and fuse the epidermis of the fingers and toes. In these cases, repair surgery can also be performed to improve movement.

The treatment of simple webbing, which involves only the removal of skin, is an uncomplicated procedure.

After the skin is cut, the small flaps in the webbed area, and at the sides of the fingers or toes, is lifted up and sewn into position. This leaves small areas of missing skin, which is then filled in with skin from the groin area if required.

After surgery, the area is wrapped carefully in a bulky dressing that restricts too much movement. Small children who have had the procedure to repair webbed fingers may need to wear a cast. If a skin graft is taken, proper healing will require the area to be moisturized, as well as protected.

If the webbed area affects fused bones, tendons, nerves and blood vessels, the surgery becomes more complicated. The surgery risks, in this instance, can include excessive bleeding, infection, and loss of sensation in the toes. A short hospital stay of around one to two days is all that is required.

If webbed toes doesn't affect your walking or pose any health risks, then no treatment is needed. Kutcher and Akroyd have lived with it for many years without surgery.



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