

Arthritis of the big toe (hallux rigidus)

Trauma and Orthopaedics

Information for patients and carers

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What is hallux rigidus?

Hallux rigidus means arthritis in the big toe joint.

This joint is at the base of the big toe and is called the first metatarso-phalangeal (MTP) joint.



It is called 'hallux rigidus' as hallux means big toe and rigidus means stiff.

Arthritis happens when the soft protective layer (cartilage) at the end of the bones wears away. This can cause pain and stiffness. Bony lumps may also form close to the joint which can stop the toe from bending properly.

What are the causes?

Hallux rigidus can happen because of:

- wear and tear
- injury to the big toe joint
- long-term bunions that are not treated
- conditions like rheumatoid arthritis

What treatment is available?

Treatment depends on how bad the pain and stiffness are in your big toe. Other medical conditions, such as diabetes or circulation problems also need to be considered.

Non-surgical treatment includes:

- painkillers
- steroid injections
- insoles provided by an orthotist
- wearing stiff-soled shoes or rocker soles

Surgical treatment may be offered if other treatments do not help. The operation is usually done under a general anaesthetic (a combination of medicines that brings on a sleep-like state). A local anaesthetic around the ankle is used to help with pain after the surgery.

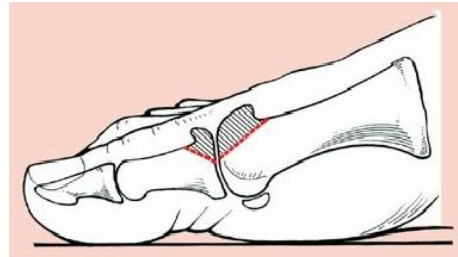
What is a cheilectomy?

A cheilectomy removes the bony lumps that form on top of the big toe. This can reduce pain and improve movement, but will not cure the arthritis. It is usually recommended as treatment for mild arthritis.

During the operation:

- a cut is made along the top of the big toe
- the bony lumps are removed
- the toe is moved gently to check movement

After surgery you will be given a special shoe to wear for about two weeks. You should gently move your toe straight away to keep your toe flexible. An outpatient physiotherapy appointment will be arranged for you.



What is an MTP joint fusion?

A fusion means the bones in the joint are joined together permanently. Bony lumps are also taken away and any deformities are corrected.

During the operation:

- a cut is made along the top of the big toe
- the surfaces of the joint are removed
- the bones are held together and positioned to correct any deformity
- metal plates and screws will permanently hold the bones in the correct position
- this allows them to heal and fuse together



As the bones heal, they will appear as one bone with no joint. This means the toe will not bend at that point. The tip of the big toe will still move.

You will be given crutches and a special shoe that has a large heel to wear for at least six weeks. This will help the wound and bone to heal.

Can I walk after the operation?

You will be able to walk with the special shoe and crutches. However, you should:

- not walk for more than 10 to 15 minutes each hour
- keep your foot raised above the level of your heart, this helps reduce the swelling in your foot for the first six weeks

What are the risks?

All foot surgery has some risks, including:

- swelling
- infection
- scarring
- numbness
- blood clots

The main specific risks are the failure of the bones to fuse. This risk is increased in patients who are diabetic, have rheumatoid arthritis and in those who smoke. We advise you to stop smoking before the procedure.

Will I be able to wear normal shoes?

Once your foot has fully healed, you can wear normal shoes. It is recommended that you wear stiff-soled shoes or trainers for support.

After the fusion you will not be able to wear heels greater than about 2.5cm (1 inch). This is because your toe will be in a fixed position.

Further information

Please let staff know of any concerns or questions you may have. We will do our best to answer your queries quickly.