

Hallux Rigidus (Arthritis of Big toe)

Hallux rigidus means arthritis of big toe (1st MTP joint). This is commonest joint to develop arthritis within the foot. This is due to the biomechanics of the foot and the way most of the weight goes through the big toe joint during mobilization as well as during day-to-day activities.

Patients can often confuse this condition with the bunion because of large bony bumps that can form around the joint due to arthritis. However, the main difference is that there is lot more discomfort in the actual joint from hallux rigidus as opposed to pain over the bony prominence on the inner border of the foot in patients with bunion. More importantly, there is significant stiffness in the big toe joint with hallux rigidus as compared to bunion.

Symptoms

Most patients would have noted pain and stiffness in the big toe for a long-standing duration. Symptoms generally deteriorate quite slowly. To begin with, these symptoms can be quite intermittent and aggravated by prolonged walking or strenuous activities. If the symptoms progress this condition may affect your day-to-day activity as well as difficulty with footwear. You may also notice puffiness/swelling around the big toe and some patients may actually feel bony bumps around the joint.

Painful callosities are often noted due to the bony prominences and associated friction with the footwear. Some patients also notice altered gait pattern and occasionally pain on the outer border of the foot.

Clinical Management

Initial management (for milder cases) includes establishing the diagnosis and use of simple treatment measures like use of shoes with wide toe box, gentle stretching exercises, use of orthotics, painkillers and anti-inflammatories, etc.

If the symptoms remain persistent as would be expected in patients with moderate to severe cases of arthritis, surgery is the treatment of choice.

Surgical treatment for hallux rigidus

Surgery is carried out generally whilst you are put to sleep (General Anaesthetic).

Various surgical options can be considered depending on the severity of arthritis and your functional requirements. Commonly, these are the three options:

1. Cheilectomy: This is a relatively small surgical procedure, which involves removing bony bumps around the big toe (1st MTP joint). The joint is lavaged with saline as well. This procedure generally helps improve the movements of the big toe and also helps relieve the pressure/pain from the bony prominences.

Advantages of this procedure include a relatively quick recovery (generally within 3 to 4 weeks). It also helps preserve your own joint whilst improving your functional quality of life.

Disadvantages of this procedure include the possibility of some ongoing discomfort due to arthritis in the joint.

2. Joint Replacement: This procedure involves removing the damaged joint surfaces and replacing them

with artificial joint. This procedure has evolved over the years and various materials have been tried to replace this joint. Potential advantage of this procedure is that you can retain the movements in the big toe and also expect excellent pain relief.

Unfortunately, medium to long-term results of this procedure are not promising and hence, this procedure is reserved for a very small proportion of patients.

3. Joint Fusion (Arthrodesis): This procedure involves removing the bony prominences around the joint and preparing the damaged joint surfaces followed by fixation of the joint with some metalwork (screws/plate).

This is obviously a bigger procedure than option 1 i.e. Cheilectomy. Recovery is therefore likely to be slower and takes approximately 2-3 months. In most cases, you will be provided with a special orthopaedic shoe with a big heel (to be worn for around 6 weeks).

Advantages of this procedure include excellent long-term functional outcome in vast majority of patients. Pain relief is reliably achieved in vast majority of patients.

Disadvantages of this procedure include permanent stiffness of this joint. It can take some time to get used to this. It also limits the choice of footwear.