Hallux Rigidus

When the big toe stops bending, and what helps

Tips from your podiatrist at Ace Sports Medicine

ACE SPORTS MEDICINE
UPPER MOUNT GRAVATT

Hallux rigidus is osteoarthritis of the joint at the base of the big toe. It is described as the most common arthritic condition of the foot, and it often responds well to footwear, offloading and load management long before surgery is discussed.

WHAT TO KNOW ABOUT A STIFF, PAINFUL BIG TOE

1 WHAT IT IS

Osteoarthritis of the first metatarsophalangeal joint, the joint at the base of the big toe. The toe stiffens and becomes sore, particularly on push-off.

ARTHRITIS OF THE BIG TOE JOINT.

2 HOW COMMON

Symptomatic osteoarthritis of that joint affects about 8 percent of adults over 50, rising steeply with age. Imaging-based rates in over 50s run higher again.

CHANGES ON IMAGING DO NOT ALWAYS MEAN SYMPTOMS.

3 NOT A BUNION

A bunion drifts the big toe sideways and creates a bump on the inside edge of the foot. Hallux rigidus keeps the toe reasonably straight but stiffens it, with pain on top of the joint.

CHECK WHERE IT HURTS, NOT JUST THE SHAPE.

4 WHY IT MATTERS

The big toe needs to bend upward roughly 60 degrees for a normal push-off. When it stiffens, people unconsciously roll to the outside of the foot and change their stride.

SECONDARY ACHES OFTEN FOLLOW.

5 SIGNS TO NOTICE

Stiffness, pain on top of the joint, a sore push-off, a bump catching in shoes, and quietly avoiding hills, hiking or kneeling.

COMPARE ONE BIG TOE AGAINST THE OTHER.

6 WHAT HELPS

Footwear with a stiffer or rocker sole to reduce how far the toe has to bend, offloading, sensible load management and targeted strength work.

SURGERY IS NOT THE FIRST STEP.

DO I NEED A SCAN?

Not always. The diagnosis is usually clear from your history and an examination of the joint's range. Imaging is arranged through your doctor where it will change the plan, and imaging changes on their own do not automatically mean significant symptoms.

WHEN TO SEEK HELP

- A big toe that is progressively stiffening
- Pain on push-off when walking or running
- Avoiding certain shoes or activities
- New aching elsewhere in the foot or leg
- A bump on top of the joint catching in shoes
- A sudden hot, red, very painful joint needs prompt doctor review

Early changes are easier to manage than late ones.

WHAT CAN A PODIATRIST DO?

- Measure and compare your big toe range
- Separate hallux rigidus from a bunion
- Advise on footwear and rocker soles
- Offload the joint with padding or orthoses
- Set sensible load management
- Guide targeted foot strength work

WHAT HELPS DAY TO DAY?

The aim is to reduce what the joint has to do, rather than forcing it into a painful range. A sensible order:

Stiffer or rocker sole shoes — **Offload the sore joint** — **Manage load week to week** — **Targeted strength work**

Bring the two pairs of shoes you wear most to your appointment.

Helping You Perform at Your Best

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Need support with a stiff or painful big toe?

Book your appointment today

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