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## Original Research

## Immediate Weightbearing After First Metatarsophalangeal Joint Arthrodesis With Screw and Locking Plate Fixation: A Short-Term Review

Kyle W. Abben, DPM, AACFAS<sup>1</sup>, Matthew D. Sorensen, DPM, FACFAS<sup>2</sup>, Brett J. Waverly, DPM, AACFAS<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Fellowship Trained Foot and Ankle Surgeon, Park Nicollet Health Services, St. Louis Park, MN

<sup>2</sup>Fellowship Trained Foot and Ankle Surgeon, Weil Foot and Ankle Institute, Des Plaines, IL

<sup>3</sup>Fellowship Trained Foot and Ankle Surgeon, Orthopedic Specialty Clinic Ltd., Fredericksburg, VA

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## ABSTRACT

Historically, the postoperative protocol for patients undergoing first metatarsophalangeal joint arthrodesis has included 6 weeks of non-weightbearing, followed by protected weightbearing in a below-the-knee cast boot or postoperative shoe. This prolonged period of non-weightbearing predisposes the patient to disuse atrophy, osteopenia, deep vein thrombosis risk, and, overall, a prolonged time to recovery. The present study reports a retrospective review of a patient cohort that underwent first metatarsophalangeal joint fusion with immediate full weightbearing postoperatively. Thirty consecutive first metatarsophalangeal joint arthrodeses were performed during the study period. Five patients were excluded secondary to insufficient postoperative follow-up data or a lack of adequate radiographic evaluation at regular postoperative intervals. Conical reamers were used for joint preparation. Internal fixation, consisting of a single cannulated interfragmentary compression screw and a dorsal locking plate, was used in all patients. The results showed that patients achieved clinical healing at an average of 5.92 weeks and showed radiographic fusion at an average of 6.83 weeks. The patients in the present study had an overall union rate of 96%. Complications included 1 nonunion, 1 superficial wound infection, 1 wound dehiscence, 1 case of symptomatic hardware, and 2 patients with symptomatic hallux interphalangeal joint arthralgia. The mean visual analog pain score preoperatively was 6.64 (range 4 to 8) and postoperatively was 0.6 (range 0 to 4). In conclusion, we found that immediate full weightbearing after first metatarsophalangeal joint fusion in the context of interfragmentary compression and locked plating techniques is a safe, predictable postoperative protocol that allows for a successful fusion interval and an early return to regular activity.

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First metatarsophalangeal joint (MTPJ) arthrodesis is a well-established and well-documented procedure that allows for treatment of numerous first ray maladies, including degenerative joint disease associated with trauma, end-stage hallux rigidus, severe hallux abductovalgus, geriatric hallux abductovalgus, hallux varus, septic MTPJ, and rheumatoid arthritis (1,2). Although numerous reports have directed various postoperative protocols, the historical regimen has included 6 weeks of non-weightbearing for the operative extremity (1–15). Well-documented risks, however, are associated with extended periods of immobilization, including disuse muscular and

osseous atrophy, fall risk, an extended time to rehabilitation, and the risk of deep vein thrombosis (5). These risks have made the procedure traditionally more difficult for patients and surgeons to accept.

The first MTPJ fusion rates with immediate weightbearing reported in preceding studies were consistent with previous studies in which patients were kept non-weightbearing for a specified number of weeks by the provider (1,2,4–7,11–15). Dayton and McCall (2) reported a 100% fusion rate after allowing their patients to immediately bear full weight on their heel or lateral foot in a surgical shoe. Taylor et al (4) allowed their patient cohort to be fully weightbearing immediately postoperatively in a surgical shoe, with a 96% union rate. Storts and Camasta (16) evaluated union after first MTPJ arthrodesis with immediate propulsive weightbearing in a surgical shoe with buried Kirschner wire fixation versus crossing screw fixation. No statistically significant difference was found between buried Kirschner wire fixation (97.9% union rate) and crossing screw fixation (95.9%)

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Address correspondence to: Matthew D. Sorensen, DPM, FACFAS, Weil Foot and Ankle Institute, 1455 East Golf Road, No. 110 Des Plaines, IL 60016.

E-mail address: [mdsoren34@gmail.com](mailto:mdsoren34@gmail.com) (M.D. Sorensen).

with immediate weightbearing in a surgical shoe (16). Lampe et al (6) found that early weightbearing resulted in a fusion rate equal to that for those kept non-weightbearing for 4 weeks.

The construct of internal fixation has also varied widely in reported studies, ranging from Kirschner wires to locking plates with crossed or parallel screws (1–15). In 2008, Berlet et al (1) noted that rigid internal fixation is essential for arthrodesis to help increase the rate of bony union and maintain the desired position. They also noted a lack of consensus in the reported data regarding the optimal technique for joint preparation, positioning, or type of fixation (1). Hyer et al (17) studied static plating with and without lag screw fixation and locked plating with and without lag screw fixation and found no difference in union after first MTPJ arthrodesis. Our technique used conical reamers and joint fenestration for preparation, with a subsequent interfragmentary screw and dorsal locking plate providing stable internal fixation.

The purpose of the present retrospective study was to evaluate the interval to clinical and radiographic fusion of patients who had undergone first MTPJ arthrodesis with a single cannulated interfragmentary screw and dorsal locking plate and subsequent immediate full weightbearing postoperatively.

#### Patients and Methods

The medical and radiographic records were reviewed for 30 consecutive patients who had undergone first MTPJ arthrodesis from December 2009 to February 2012. Given the retrospective nature and nonspecific data collected, the present study was exempt from institutional review board approval. All procedures were performed by the senior author (M.D.S.) for a variety of great toe maladies, including hallux abductovalgus, hallux rigidus, severe hallux abductovalgus with concomitant hallux rigidus, and rheumatoid arthritis. All patients who had undergone first MTPJ fusion within the study period were selected for inclusion in the cohort. Patients with <8 weeks of follow-up data or no postoperative radiographs from weeks 2 to 12 after surgery available were excluded from the cohort, as were patients who had undergone simultaneous procedures that required a non-weightbearing status. The initial review of the data identified 30 patients who had undergone first MTPJ arthrodesis. After applying our exclusion criteria, 25 patients with 25 fusions remained for inclusion into our study.

The following data were obtained from each patient's medical record: age, sex, body mass index, preoperative and postoperative visual analog scale (VAS) scores, time to clinical fusion, time to radiographic fusion, need for revision surgery, postoperative complications, delayed union, nonunion, tobacco use, disability, adjunct procedures, the need for hardware removal, and the type of internal fixation construct used. We used the Wilcoxon signed ranks test to compare the preoperative and postoperative VAS pain scores. Statistical significance was defined at the 5% ( $p \leq .05$ ) level. The analyses were performed by 1 author (K.W.A.).

#### Surgical Technique

A dorsomedial incision was made just medial to the extensor hallucis longus tendon. Standard dissection and MTPJ capsulotomy were performed. Joint preparation consisted of placing a guidewire longitudinally down the intramedullary canal of both the first metatarsal and the proximal phalanx, followed by contouring using cup and cone reamers. The corresponding articular surfaces were then fenestrated using a 2.0-mm drill bit. The hallux was then positioned in a slightly abducted and dorsiflexed position to maintain a rectus alignment. Stable rigid internal fixation was provided in all cases using a 3.0-mm cannulated interfragmentary screw, followed by a dorsally placed locking plate. The screw was directed from distally and medially to proximally and laterally. All plates were low-profile first MTPJ fusion plates designed with slight abduction and dorsiflexion to accommodate proper hallux positioning during first MTPJ fusion. However, the plates were contoured according to surgeon preference for the position desired. Eccentric drilling through the plate was used to aid the screw in further compression across the fusion site before proximal locked screw placement. Standard layered closure was then performed, and a dry sterile dressing was applied. The patient was placed into a stiff-soled surgical shoe. The sutures were removed at 2 weeks postoperatively.

All patients were allowed to immediately bear full weight postoperatively. No instructions were given to the patients to alter their gait (i.e., walk on the lateral aspect of their foot or heel). The patients were scheduled for follow-up clinical and radiographic examinations at 2, 6, 10, and 14 weeks postoperatively. Patients undergoing simultaneous hammertoe correction were seen at 2, 4, 7, 10, and 14 weeks for examination with radiographs, because they had their pins removed at the 4-week mark.

All procedures and postoperative clinical examinations were performed by the senior author (M.D.S.). All radiographs were independently examined by 2 authors (M.D.S., K.W.A.). Delayed union was defined as partial union occurring >16 weeks postoperatively. Nonunion was defined as lacking fusion >6 months postoperatively. Any delayed or nonunion was further evaluated by computed tomography for confirmation and further treatment planning, if indicated. Radiographically, union was determined by visualizing bony trabeculation crossing the fusion site on  $\geq 2$  views of weightbearing foot radiographs. Clinically, union was determined by the absence of pain and motion with manipulation of the fusion site.

#### Results

The records of 30 consecutive patients who had undergone first MTPJ arthrodesis from December 2009 to February 2012 were reviewed. Five patients were excluded because <8 weeks of follow-up data available (4 patients) and/or the lack of radiographs between postoperative weeks 2 and 12 (1 patient only had postoperative films taken at 2 weeks and 6 months). After applying our exclusion criteria, 25 patients and 25 fusions remained. The mean patient age was 60.04 (range 45 to 77) years, and 6 males (24%) and 19 females (75%) were included. The average body mass index was 27.6 (range 21.9 to 36.4) kg/m<sup>2</sup>. Six (24%) of the 25 patients were active tobacco users at surgery. Four patients were on disability. Five patients had undergone simultaneous procedures (Table 1). Nineteen patients received bone marrow aspirate from the calcaneus to their fusion site. The preoperative diagnoses consisted of hallux rigidus (20 of 25), hallux abductovalgus (1 of 25), and hallux abductovalgus with hallux rigidus (4 of 25; Table 2).

The complications are summarized in Table 3. One patient developed a superficial wound infection, which had resolved after 1 week of oral antibiotics alone. One patient developed partial wound dehiscence, which had completely healed by 6 weeks postoperatively. One patient developed painful prominent hardware, which was removed at 6 months postoperatively, and subsequently experienced complete resolution of symptoms with hardware removal. Two patients developed mild hallux interphalangeal joint arthralgia >1 year

**Table 1**

Summary of adjunct procedures performed in patients undergoing first metatarsophalangeal joint arthrodesis (N = 25)

Additional Procedure	n (%)
Weil osteotomy	5 (20)
Duvries condylectomy	4 (16)
Pan metatarsal head resection	1 (4)
Taylor's bunionectomy	1 (4)
Extensor digitorum longus lengthening	1 (4)

**Table 2**

Primary diagnoses for study population (N = 25)

Diagnosis	n (%)
Hallux rigidus	20 (80)
Hallux abductovalgus with hallux rigidus	4 (16)
Hallux abductovalgus	1 (4)

**Table 3**

Summary of postoperative complications observed in postoperative period (N = 25)

Complication	n (%)
Hallux interphalangeal joint arthralgia	2 (8)
Superficial wound infection	1 (4)
Partial wound dehiscence	1 (4)
Painful hardware	1 (4)
Nonunion	1 (4)

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