- Bones

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What's up with... hitchhiker's THUMB

If your thumb looks as if it's doing a backbend, here's why.

BY KAYLA BLANTON



Go ahead and give yourself a thumbs-up – and then take a closer look. The majority of human thumbs go straight up, with a slight curve back at the top knuckle. But for roughly one in three people, the thumb bends much further back – if yours goes more than 50 degrees, making what looks almost like an upside-down 'L' shape, you have distal hyperextensibility, which simply means super-flexible ligaments. The condition is also known by the apt description 'hitchhiker's thumb'. Hop in as experts explain what this means.

Why so bendy?

Some people can curl their tongues or wiggle their ears, and hitchhiker's thumb is similar in that it's most often "a harmless anatomy quirk," explains assistant clinical professor of physical medicine and rehabilitation Dr Isabel Huang. "Some people with it have super-flexible joints all over, while others don't," notes internal medicine expert Dr Raj Dasgupta, who points out that the condition is usually genetic.

When you're a bit too flexible

While a funky thumb is usually nothing to worry about, in some cases it may indicate a higher risk for disorders such as hypermobile Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome (hEDS), Dr Huang says. With hEDS, your joints move beyond the normal range because you have extra-loose connective tissue. There are usually other symptoms such as anxiety, asthma, acid reflux, hives, back pain, jaw pain and GI issues. "Being hypermobile does not mean you have hEDS," Dr Huang says, but if you have additional symptoms, it's worth talking to a physician who understands hEDS. Hitchhiker's thumb may be related to arthritis, though not always. It may also affect grip strength. "It's usually more of an annoyance, but for some it can impact daily tasks," Dr Dasgupta says.

How to take care of your thumb

If your hitchhiker's thumb causes discomfort or if you're having a hard time using your hands, strengthening the muscles around the joint and avoiding repetitive strain can help. "Bracing or taping can add extra support if needed," says Dr Dasgupta. For guidance, check with a physical therapist who specialises in hands. P

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