

CARPAL TUNNEL SYNDROME

What is carpal tunnel syndrome?

Carpal tunnel syndrome is a common, painful disorder of the wrist and hand.

How does it occur?

Carpal tunnel syndrome is caused by pressure on the median nerve in your wrist. People who use their hands and wrists repeatedly in the same way (for example, illustrators, carpenters, and assembly-line workers) tend to develop carpal tunnel syndrome.

Pressure on the nerve may also be caused by a fracture or other injury, which may cause inflammation and swelling. In addition, pressure may be caused by inflammation and swelling associated with arthritis, diabetes, and hypothyroidism. Carpal tunnel syndrome can also occur during pregnancy.

What are the symptoms?

The symptoms include:

- pain, numbness, or tingling in your hand and wrist, especially in the thumb and index and middle fingers; pain may radiate up into the forearm
- increased pain with increased use of your hand, such as when you are driving or reading the newspaper
- increased pain at night
- weak grip and tendency to drop objects held in the hand
- sensitivity to cold
- muscle deterioration especially in the thumb (in later stages)

How is it diagnosed?

Your healthcare provider will review your symptoms, examine you, and discuss the ways you use your hands. He or she may also do the following tests:

- Your provider may tap the inside middle of your wrist over the median nerve. You may feel pain or a sensation like an electric shock.
- You may be asked to bend your wrist down for one minute to see if this causes symptoms.
- Your provider may arrange to test the response of your nerves and muscles to electrical stimulation.

How is it treated?

If you have a disease that is causing carpal tunnel syndrome (such as rheumatoid arthritis), treatment of the disease may relieve your symptoms.

Other treatment focuses on relieving irritation and pressure on the nerve in your wrist. To relieve pressure your healthcare provider may suggest:

- restricting use of your hand or changing the way you use it
- changing your work station (the position of your desk, computer, and chair) to one that irritates your wrist less
- wearing a wrist splint
- exercises

Your provider may prescribe an oral cortisone-like medicine or a nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory medicine, such as ibuprofen. He or she may recommend an injection of a cortisone-like medicine into the carpal tunnel area. In some cases surgery may be necessary (adults aged 65 years and older should not take non-steroidal anti-inflammatory medicine for more than 7 days without their healthcare provider's approval).

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