

What is a Carpal Tunnel Syndrome?

Robert Bents, MD

Have you ever noticed your fingers tingle or feel numb after working on the computer? Do you ever get sharp pain or burning in your wrist at night? If so, you may have carpal tunnel syndrome (CTS).

What Is the Carpal Tunnel?

The carpal tunnel or canal is a narrow tube between bones of the wrist and a firm ligament of the wrist and hand. There are nerves, blood vessels and tendons within the canal. The median nerve passes through the canal to the thumb, index and middle finger.

What Causes CTS?

Some people are born with a narrow canal which increases the pressure on the nerve. Conditions which cause swelling or fluid retention such as pregnancy, hormonal changes or weight gain can lead to CTS. Use of vibrating tools may worsen the condition. Diabetes can affect the nerve itself making it more vulnerable to compression. Women are approximately 3 times more likely to develop CTS. It is very common in those who perform repetitive work or activities such as typing, computer work, sewing, cleaning, or writing.

What are the Symptoms?

Burning, tingling or numbness of the thumb, index or middle finger are the most common symptoms. Some feel that their fingers feel swollen or itchy. There may be weakness of grip and difficulty distinguishing hot from cold by touch. You may lose grip strength. In advanced cases there may be wasting of the thumb muscles.

How is CTS diagnosed?

Early diagnosis and treatment is essential to prevent permanent damage to the median nerve. A thorough exam of the hands, arms, shoulders and neck helps determine if the symptoms are arising from the wrist/carpal tunnel or other conditions. Specific compression tests of the wrist are performed. Each finger should be checked for sensation, strength and atrophy. Finally, electrodiagnostic studies are frequently used. Electrodes are placed on the arm and wrist and electric impulses are transmitted to determine whether there is compression or slowing of the median nerve.

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Can I Avoid Surgery?

In many cases, resting the hand and wrist and taking frequent stretching breaks can limit the symptoms. A wrist brace is often used to keep the wrist in a neutral position. There is some evidence that Vitamin B6 supplements relieve symptoms. It is important for diabetic patients to control their blood sugars. An occupational therapist can help with specific stretching exercises.

What Does Surgery Entail?

Carpal Tunnel Release is a very common and successful surgery and is generally recommended for cases that do not respond to the above treatments. Open or mini-open release surgery uses an incision in the palm to release the ligament overlying the nerve. Endoscopic surgery uses a 1.3 cm incision in the wrist crease through which a small camera is inserted. The surgeon visualizes and incises the ligament from inside the wrist. Endoscopic surgery generally allows faster, more painless recovery and is therefore my preferred procedure for carpal tunnel syndrome.

When Can I Get Back to Work?

In most cases you can return to work about a week after the stitches come out. The stitches are removed at 10-12 days after surgery. If you have a more vigorous job you might need 6 weeks off from work to prevent inflammation or excessive scar formation.

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