

Orthopaedic Connection

Wrist Tendonitis

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If I had said de Quervain's Tendonitis how many of you would know what I'm talking about? How "doctor speak" can you get? I promised you last time to use patient language and I will, always. Some medical terms may be used, but only with adequate explanation. By the way there are two ways to spell tendonitis. The spelling, which is used in information for patients typically is tendonitis as I have used it. In medical publications and hospital records the spelling tendinitis is commonly used. Both spellings are correct.

I'm concentrating on wrist tendonitis this time, because it is so close in the wrist to what we covered last week; arthritis of the base of the thumb.

In fact it is on the same side of the wrist, the thumb side and is about two inches above the thumb arthritis location. The two conditions are often confused, because they are so close together.

Their cause however is very much different. In one, the bone is worn out and the joint looks bad. In the case of wrist tendonitis the pain symptoms may be similar, but the x-rays are completely normal.

Cause

Wrist tendonitis is caused by inflammation around three tendons at the wrist, which pass to the thumb. More specifically the synovial lining around the tendons is swollen and inflamed. This causes pinching of the tendons in their little compartment through which they pass on their way to the thumb. Making a fist and grasping or holding things are common painful movements in this condition.

Symptoms

Pain over the thumb side of the wrist is the primary symptom. Pain may appear gradually or on occasion acutely. The pain may radiate down into the thumb or radiate up into the forearm. There may even be a sensation of catching or snapping with certain thumb movements. Irritation of a nearby skin nerve lying on top of the tendon sheath may cause numbness on the back of the thumb and index finger.

Treatment

Our goal is to relieve the pain caused by the irritation and swelling.

Thumb/wrist splints are available which can limit movement and help in that way. Theragesic applied to the area three times a day can decrease inflammation as can oral anti-inflammatory medication like Advil.

I'm not big on cortisone injections in small places like this around tendons, as it can weaken tendons and cause them to rupture. I have seen this happen.

If symptoms are severe, surgery is curative in most cases. I do it as an outpatient. The anesthesia doctor can anesthetize the arm. A small one inch incision is made to release the tendons and remove swollen lining tissue. I remove the splint and sutures in seven to ten days. Nature takes over and makes it feel better in two or three weeks (remember the 1/3 rule). That's it.

If you have a choice of this or thumb arthritis, I'd choose this if I were you! Much easier to treat.

Please log on to our office teaching website for much more information about wrist tendonitis. The website, www.orthopodsurgeon.com can lead you into Your Orthopaedic Connection, which is a treasure trove of valuable information.

Our goal is simple. To help people return to more pain free functional lives.

Be well.

Dr. Haverbush