

## *Orthopaedic Connection*

### **Painful Thumb. Why?**

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#### *Transforming patient information into patient understanding.*

Most of us take our thumb (and a lot of other stuff!) for granted. Pinch lightly, open a tough jar, grasp to help yourself up. No problem.

Then all of a sudden, dang! I've lost strength in my hand and my thumb hurts. "Oh, it will probably go away" as most aches and pains do.

But it doesn't and maybe it gets worse.

#### **A typical saga of the painful thumb and wrist.**

- Here is a prescription for some Motrin you are told.
- Call if it gets worse the office nurse tells you. It does.
- X-ray of the hand ordered.
- X-ray report comes back "negative".
- Hmm. Maybe it is carpal tunnel you are told.
- Doctor's office orders a nerve test of affected arm and hand, which then is reported to be normal.
- Patient says, "Am I imagining this?" Nope.

#### **Why?**

Many hand and wrist symptoms overlap and diagnosis can be confusing. As far as the x-ray is concerned, I have found for years that subtle changes can be overlooked. The hand x-ray report by the radiologist to the family doctor is often "negative".

#### **"So What Do I Have?"**

Arthritis at the base of the thumb where the metacarpal bone joins the wrist is a very often overlooked cause of hand/wrist pain.

As an Orthopaedic Surgery specialist I look at the x-rays I order and I examine the hand and wrist carefully. It is amazing how often I find this condition in patients who have had symptoms for a long time. If you don't have a thumb that is working well, you have lost 50% of your hand function.

Diagnosis can be confusing because many hand conditions have some overlap of symptoms.

#### **Menu of Treatment**

Don't worry I won't haul out surgery as the only thing on the menu! We will order something together. You do have some choices.

- Warm water to relax tissues followed by hand flexibility and strength exercises you can be taught.
- Special hand/thumb splint
- Ibuprofen (the old standby!) or similar
- Heat and ice to painful area
- I can inject the joint with x-ray control in the office
- Alter activities as possible to decrease pain

#### **Surgery**

For those patients whose symptoms can't be controlled, surgery is curative. A portion of the arthritic joint is removed. A piece of tendon tissue from the tissue bank is inserted into the space. The thumb then has to be placed in a cast followed by a splint for six weeks. This has been very successful in relieving the symptoms and restoring function to the hand.

**Gratiot County Herald Archive and Office Website**

I hope what you have read has raised questions. No problem!

Please log onto [www.orthopodsurgeon.com](http://www.orthopodsurgeon.com). It has a huge amount of musculoskeletal information in the Website and the Archive of all previous GCH articles.

Check it out and be amazed what you can learn.

Good health. Good life. All the best to you. Be well.

Dr. Haverbush