

Orthopaedic Connection

It's A Pain In The Wrist

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Transforming patient information into patient understanding.

So far I haven't heard of people or situations being referred to as "a pain in the wrist". It might be appropriate though, because it might hurt more than other places of our anatomy.

You ask how can my wrist be O.K. one day and the next day you have this irritation and shooting pain on the thumb side of the wrist. Pain can shoot down into the thumb and up into the forearm.

What's going on?

Well, when you tell me what you have been doing with your hand I will have a better idea.

Holding your thumb away from the forefinger in effect forming an L sign, is usually the cause of the problem. If done to excess in our work or any activity it can cause problems. Moms taking care of small children do this all the time in their care.

Obviously anyone who uses their hand in that way to excess might suffer with it.

It is often confused with carpal tunnel, arthritis, pinched nerve, etc.

What Is It?

In a nutshell it is an inflammatory condition around 3 tendons at the wrist that pass together through a little compartment on the thumb side of the wrist. The tendons are wrapped in synovial tissue which can become irritated and swollen by overuse. Since there is very little space in the compartment normally, irritation and pain result with almost any thumb use – even picking up a cup of coffee.

“Help Me?”

Just being aware to try and avoid the L sign between thumb and forefinger can help. Avoiding repetitive pinching and twisting is important. I always advise ice, Ibuprofen or Naproxen. A small brace may help to control thumb motion also.

Patients have usually heard that a “cortisone shot” cures everything. Injecting a large joint like the shoulder or knee is way different than injecting a tight little area where 3 critical tendons that operate the thumb are located. Cortisone has been known to weaken tendons and cause them to rupture. Ouch!

So while I have infrequently done a wrist injection, I prefer not to because I could be causing way more harm than good.

Will It Go Away?

Maybe, if you are persistent with treatment for at least a month. After that I think the chance it will go away on its own declines a lot. And then of course the question arises about will it return. The answer is again maybe and if it does you are back to square one.

Surgical Treatment

I would say most patients eventually have an operation to eliminate the problem. Here is how I do it.

The surgery is done at the hospital as an outpatient. The anesthesia doctor can put your arm to sleep to allow the surgery to be done painlessly. Through an incision about 1 ½ inches long on the thumb side of the wrist, I can find where the tendons are pinched and I can release the tight tissue over the little compartment. That allows the tendons and their synovial lining to heal. Then the pain goes away and the patient is happy.

After Surgery

I like to place a nice padded bandage with a splint in it to protect the wrist for about a week before I remove the sutures. There is some use of the fingers and thumb, but resting the hand for a week is best. It takes about 3 – 4 weeks after the sutures are out for full recovery.

That's it! I have given your hand and wrist back to you!

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Good health, good life, all the best to you.

Dr. Haverbush