

## *Orthopaedic Connection*

### **Hand Pain and Dysfunction, Infections and Nerve Problems**

By Thomas J. Haverbush, M.D.  
Orthopaedic Surgeon

*Transforming patient information into patient understanding.*

As I promised last week this is the last Hand Problem article that I had no idea would stretch over 17 weeks! (Just kidding, only 4 actually).

#### **Hand Infections**

They can be devastating. Minor problems can turn into very serious problems that can affect your hand for the rest of your life. So don't fool around. Get to somebody who knows what they are doing. Get help. Bacteria can destroy healthy tissue in the hand and even enter the blood stream.

##### Superficial

These infections involve the skin and tissue above the tendons.

- Paronychia

Bacteria infection around the finger nail cuticle. Many causes – hangnail, manicure, nail biting. Redness, swelling, pain. Get treatment. Warm soaks, antibiotics, even surgery to drain pus.

- Fingertip infection (felon)

Abscess in the fingertip. Antibiotics, but may require surgery to drain.

- Cellulitis

Soft tissue infection that can begin in the finger or hand and spread up to hand. It can become severe and require IV antibiotics in the hospital.

##### Deep

These are very bad actors that I will list for you.

- Tendon sheath infection from puncture, bite or cut. These infections are deep in the finger or hand. I would need to drain surgically and start IV antibiotics.

- Deep hand infections occur in deep compartments in the hand. I consider this a surgical emergency in my patients.

- Septic arthritis usually occurs from a wound into or near a joint. Bacteria can destroy a joint. This is also a surgical emergency.

#### **Nerve Problems**

The most common nerve problems affecting the hand are nerve compression conditions or as patients refer to them – “pinched nerve”. There are three major nerves that operate hand function. They are median nerve, ulnar nerve and radial nerve.

- Median nerve compression is the one that causes carpal tunnel syndrome. Carpal tunnel is a condition that everyone seems to know something about. It occurs at the wrist. Carpal tunnel has become so common and well known that patients often come to the office and tell me what their diagnosis is! Symptoms begin gradually. Burning, tingling, numbness especially at night. Feeling of swelling, weakness in later stages. Most patients have tried splints, etc. by the time I see them. Surgery is curative in almost all cases and is very gratifying to be able to relieve the severe symptoms that my patients have.

- Ulnar nerve is a less well known nerve that can be compressed at the elbow or wrist. Both areas affect the hand; mostly hand strength and sensation in the little finger. I won't go into all the ins and outs of the ulnar nerve. I do know how to diagnose it and make you better so I'll leave it there.
- Radial nerve can be squeezed below the elbow and cause symptoms similar to tennis elbow. It is not seen too often in the office like the other two nerve conditions, but I do need to consider it.
- Cervical nerve root compression in the neck from a bulging disc can also cause hand symptoms, but there usually is a lot more pain in the arm itself than with the other conditions. They do all overlap somewhat so I have a lot to consider in diagnosis of your hand upper extremity pain.

## **Hands**

Think of all the incredible things hands can do. They are endless. Well, it is nice that the brain had over time evolved equally to the hand. Apparently you need both to do a lot of pretty neat things. Symphony, sports, building things, repairing everything imaginable – and oh yes, even Orthopaedic Surgery!

*My patients put their trust in me and what I do improves the quality of their lives.*

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Dr. Haverbush