

Orthopaedic Connection

Ganglion Cysts. What are they?

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Ganglion cysts are the most common masses in the hand. They can occur on the dorsal or top side of the hand or wrist or on the palm side. They are far more common on the top of the hand or wrist than on the palm side. Everyone thinks they know all about them because they are quite visible and can even be seen across the room sometimes!

Ganglions can be small and hard to see or even feel at times, but can be very painful. Other ganglion cysts are large and cause no symptoms.

Why do we get them?

Good question. I wish I could give you an exact cause. We think they are caused by irritation or inflammation of the tissues such as tendon lining, ligaments or joint capsule. They probably don't result from a specific injury. But since we don't know the exact reason they appear, it might in rare cases come from an event.

What are they?

Non cancerous, jelly or thick fluid filled cysts with a very thin lining. They are attached to the structures I mentioned and at times can be really plastered down to surrounding tissues. At times they are very deep. They can disappear only to return later or may never come back. They are not tumors in any sense even though about 5% of the time they do come back after a variable time following removal.

They primarily occur on the hand or wrist, but sometimes we see them on the foot or ankle.

A variation of a ganglion cyst is a so called mucous cyst which is a similar, smaller structure that arises from an arthritic finger joint above the finger nail.

Treatment choices

Many times the ganglion cyst can be simply observed if it is painless and not cosmetically unacceptable or limiting function.

Splinting or wrapping and taking anti-inflammatory medication can play a small role, but usually they don't help. I never discourage it if a person wants to try.

Aspirating the jelly or fluid from the cyst can sometimes be done if the jelly/fluid is not too thick to go through the needle. In my experience the cyst usually comes back in a short time, because you don't get rid of the sac by aspirating.

What about surgery?

Since they are never cancerous it is wrong for the surgeon to imply it should be removed for that possible diagnosis. If my patient and I together decide it should come out, then we go ahead. As with so much of our hand and wrist surgery, the surgery is done as an outpatient. The arm can be anesthetized (IV block) to remove the cyst and a hand and one half of the forearm splint/bandage is placed for one week.

It takes at least a few weeks for soreness and swelling to decrease. Stitches stay in for one week or so and are removed in the office.

Learn even more about ganglions and hand and wrist problems in general on our office teaching website www.orthopodsurgeon.com and its companion link Your Orthopaedic Connection. See you next week. Be well.

Dr. Haverbush