

Argus Orthopaedic Zone

Trigger Finger

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Transforming patient information into patient understanding.

What Is It?

Well, it is not what you think. It isn't a malady of gunslingers or outlaws. There are a lot of Orthopaedic conditions that have unusual names, but I digress.

It is a common condition that occurs when a flexor (palm side) tendon in the finger or thumb becomes somewhat inflamed. The reason is not always clear.

These flexor tendons are complex structures that glide unnoticed through their little sheaths or tunnels. Trouble occurs if:

- The tendon swells
- The tunnel constricts somewhat
- Lining tissue around the tendon thickens
- Fluid builds up.

Ouch!

As the finger (and the tendon in its sheath) moves, the tendon catches or “hangs up” and then suddenly releases. This causes a snapping sensation like that of a trigger being released. It may or may not be painful. Also you may be unable to straighten the finger fully as if it is about to pull a trigger.

It can happen to any finger, but it mostly affects the middle and ring fingers.

Frequently the palm aspect of the finger is tender or painful below the knuckle.

Cause

It is not precisely known what causes the tendon inflammation. It can occur in anybody, but is much more common in patients with diabetes, carpal tunnel syndrome and rheumatoid arthritis.

Signs and Symptoms

The finger may hurt when you flex it and then it catches. Patients describe it as “going out of joint”, but that never happens, actually.

You may wake up with the finger locked in the palm. It may gradually release during the day.

Or you may simply feel swelling and stiffness and a painful mass in the palm at the base of the affected finger.

When To Call

Patients call me to treat this when it is causing significant inconvenience with their daily work or life in general; or if it is too painful to continue.

How I Treat It

In my experience Advil or similar does not help. A finger splint can keep it from locking up, but does not cure it. A steroid injection which is sometimes given (by others) might help temporarily, but it can also cause the tendon to weaken and rupture. You do not thank the doctor who did that for you. I avoid doing this like the plague, as they say.

Surgery

I release the tight sheath over the tendon and remove offending thick tissue and fluid. This allows the tendon to move freely back and forth. As the inflammation and swelling subside the finger or thumb improves.

This is done in the operating room. The anesthesia doctor can anesthetize the arm and hand and you can go home in a couple of hours after surgery. A nice bandage goes on your hand and lower forearm. Sutures come out in about 10 days and you have somewhat limited use of the hand for 3 or 4 more weeks.

This is by far the best and most effective treatment of trigger finger. Call if you need help.

Argus Orthopaedic Zone Archive and Office Website

What if there was a whole world of musculoskeletal information at one place? There is!

www.orthopodsurgeon.com opens up for you the office website, Your Orthopaedic Connection and the Archive of all previous Argus articles I have written for you, your family and friends.

Please check it out. Do yourself a favor.

Be well.

Dr. Haverbush