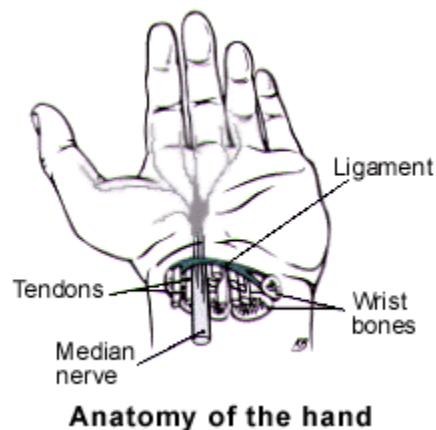


Carpal Tunnel Self Help

It is annoying when the fingers and/or hand go numb and it becomes incredibly annoying when the numbness goes on and on and on. When the hand hurts and the wrist hurts and shooting pain happens in the palm or forearm, it's miserable. It's agonizing to wake up in the middle of the night, with a screaming pain all the way up the arm. That's the usual progression of Carpal Tunnel Syndrome.

The more the hand is used, the worse the pain gets. Sometimes the numbness hurts, burns or itches. It can progress until it interferes with the ability to grip and lift. Trust me; I've experienced all of these symptoms! But I don't like pain so I work as much on my own hands as I work on others.

The narrow carpal tunnel is formed by the carpal bones and other tissues of the wrist to protect the median nerve, like a conduit protects an electric wire. The median nerve is very important because it sends the sensations felt by the thumb, and index, middle and ring fingers to the brain and returns the motor function signals back to them. Those are the "working fingers" which have very sensitive touch sensations to allow very precise movements. When the ligaments and tendons around the carpal tunnel, get swollen or inflamed, they squeeze the median nerve and disrupt the function. That is what causes the numbness and pain.



Repetitive hand motions, especially pinching or gripping with the wrist held bent will cause the syndrome. Some examples of jobs that can cause damage are computing, carpentry, grocery check out, assembly-line work, meatpacking, violinist and mechanic. Power tools that vibrate, like sanders, grinders and saws, will cause swelling in the wrist and pressure on the nerve. Hammering, painting and gripping a wrench can be culprits. Even hobbies can hurt. Gardening, needlework, golfing and canoeing can sometimes bring on the annoying and painful symptoms.

Interestingly, carpal tunnel syndrome is not a new condition. Evidence of people experiencing symptoms of carpal tunnel syndrome occurs in medical records dating back to the beginning of the 20th century.

Diseases such as diabetes, rheumatoid arthritis or thyroid disease can make one prone to develop the pain, or it could start with an injury. Because of edema, the

carpal tunnel is often pressured during the last few months of pregnancy. Treating the underlying disease (or waiting for the pregnancy to come to its logical conclusion) should resolve the symptoms in these instances.

Carpal tunnel syndrome usually is not considered serious, painful but not life threatening. With treatment, the pain will usually go away and leave no lasting damage to the hand or wrist. Untreated and long-standing, it can damage the median nerve and produce muscle atrophy. However, there are many forms of treatment.

The least invasive ways to start treating carpal tunnel syndrome are to rest the wrist and identify what actions cause the pain and modify those movements. Try using a different tool or switching hands to balance the load on the body. Wearing a splint that holds the wrist in the neutral position (straight) will allow free movement of fingers while working but take the pressure off the wrist.

Many people sleep with the hands curled or wrists bent so wearing a splint at night will ease the pain. Icing the wrist frequently, for ten minutes at a time, can reduce inflammation and relieve pain. Massaging the palm, wrist and forearm with a penetrating muscle rub, like Vicks Vapor Rub will help. Avoid doing any more than necessary with the hands for a while. Resting is OK, you know! When lying down, prop the arm up with pillows.

Avoid bending the wrist for long periods. Take breaks and stretch as often as possible. I use this stretch many times a day for my hands, wrists and arms:

1. Stretch the right arm straight ahead at shoulder height, palm down and fingers flat. Reach across with the left hand, grasp the right fingers and thumb and pull them up and back toward the body. Hold for 30 seconds while breathing slowly and deeply. Release that stretch.
2. While holding the arm straight out, turn it over so the palm is up. Reach across with the left hand, grasp the right fingers and thumb and pull them down and back toward the body. Again, hold for 30 seconds while breathing slowly and deeply, then release.
3. Repeat both movements with the left arm stretched out and the right arm pulling.

To make this even more effective, stand up and stretch both arms straight up, straight out to the sides then, together, from side-to-side. With arms at shoulder height, bend them at the elbows and push them back together as far as you can. Bend the body forward from the waist, backward from the waist and side to side. Roll the shoulders forward and backward then stretch the neck by gently moving the head backward, forward and side-to-side. Shake out the arms, shake out the legs and go back to work.

The whole series of movements takes less than five minutes but it will make a tremendous difference in the entire body. Stretching relaxes muscles and increases circulation, healing the body and clearing the mind. Don't be alarmed by cracking and popping noises during the stretches. That's the sound of tissues stretching and the body readjusting itself.

I find it really helps to stretch the hand in the opposite direction from the grasping or pinching position. With the wrists straight, open the fingers wide and stretch so that the tip of the little finger and the end of the thumb are pointing in opposite directions and are as far apart as possible. Then stretch the thumb and little finger up toward the back of the hand. Wow! That feels good!

Chiropractic adjustments of the neck and back will relieve any nerve impingements along the spine that may be contributing to the problem. A Chiropractor certified to do ART can do a tremendous job of releasing the pressure all the way from the spine to the fingers.

Therapeutic Massage relaxes all the muscles and connective tissues in the back, neck, shoulder, arms and hands. The whole body, mind and spirit can be soothed by the hands of a good therapist.

Over the counter medications like ibuprofen (one brand name: Motrin), naproxen (brand name: Aleve), or aspirin can help reduce inflammation and ease the pain. Be sure to follow the dosage and directions on the bottle and eat something when taking them to protect the stomach.

A doctor may inject the wrist with cortisone to ease the pain by relieving swelling and inflammation. Relieving the swelling for a while sometimes allows healing to occur. Often though, after the drug wears off, the pain returns

Sometimes the symptoms are so debilitating that surgery is required. The surgery involves cutting the ligament that is pressing on the median nerve. Remember that any surgery carries the risk of complications and that once something's been cut it can't be uncut. It will never be the same. That's why all the noninvasive treatments should be tried first. However, if the pain is severely affecting the quality of life, it's time to consider it.

Normal use of the wrist and hand usually returns within a few weeks to months after surgery. It is extremely important to do the exercises the surgeon prescribes. Movement and stretching during the healing process will ensure that the wrist, hand and fingers are flexible and strong at the end. Otherwise it can heal stiff and loss of use may occur.

Here are some other tips to avoid or reduce the symptoms of carpal tunnel syndrome.

- Lose weight, if overweight.
- Get treatment for any disease that may cause carpal tunnel syndrome.
- Try not to bend, extend or twist the hands for long periods, especially with force.
- Do not work with the arms too close or too far from the body.
- Do not rest the wrists on hard surfaces for long periods.
- Switch hands during work tasks.
- Make sure tools are the correct size to grip comfortably.
- Take regular breaks from repeated hand movements to give the hands and wrists time to rest.
- Don't sit or stand in the same position all day.
- Stretch frequently.

- If using a keyboard a lot, adjust the chair height so that the forearms are level with the keyboard and the wrists do not have to flex to type.
- Reduce your force and relax your grip. Strike keys softly when typing and use a wide-barreled pen with an oversized, soft grip for writing.
- Keep the hands and wrists warm to maintain flexibility.
- Improve posture to straighten neck and shoulders to reduce nerve compression at the spine.

* Because the foot and ankle have similar anatomy to the hand and wrist, tarsal tunnel syndrome can occur. If the sensory nerve becomes irritated by pressure in the tarsal tunnel, the same types of symptoms occur in the foot, ankle and leg. This condition is far less common than carpal tunnel but is caused by similar stresses on the feet and treated with similar stretches and position modification.

If you have these symptoms, don't suffer needlessly. Get proactive! Pay attention to your body positioning and movement. Identify what things cause the pain and modify wherever possible. Stretch and rest frequently during the task. In most cases, the pressure can be relieved and the pain stopped without medical intervention. If the pain becomes unbearable, discuss further options with your doctor.

<http://familydoctor.org/023.xml>

http://www.medicinenet.com/carpal_tunnel_syndrome/article.htm

<http://classes.kumc.edu/sah/resources/handkines/bone/metacarpals.html>

<http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/carpal-tunnel-syndrome/DS00326>

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