



What is it?

Carpal Tunnel Syndrome is irritation of the median nerve as it passes through the wrist. The condition can occur at any age, but tends to affect those in their 40s and 50s and is more common in women than men.

Symptoms

The main symptom of Carpal Tunnel Syndrome is pain in your hand, and sometimes in your forearm. Symptoms can vary from mild to severe. The symptoms are usually worse at night, but may also be noticed during daily activities.

Specific symptoms of carpal tunnel syndrome include:

- Pain or aching in your hand and, in some cases, your lower forearm,
- Pins and needles, or a tingling or burning sensation in your thumb, forefinger, middle finger and the half of your ring finger.
- Numbness in these fingers, or part of your palm, may also develop if the condition becomes worse.
- A weakened grip in the affected hand, often affecting your thumb. In some people, there may also be wasting of the muscles at the base of the thumb.

What causes it?

The carpal tunnel is a narrow space at the front of your wrist. The main nerve to your hand is called the median nerve and it passes through the carpal tunnel along with the tendons that bend the fingers and wrist. The symptoms of Carpal Tunnel Syndrome are caused by irritation of the median nerve and may be due to:

- Conditions affecting the joints in the wrist, such as rheumatoid arthritis.
- Wrist injuries, such as joint dislocations and fractures, can narrow the carpal tunnel and press on the median nerve.
- Hormonal changes, such as an under-active thyroid gland (hypothyroidism) or an over-active thyroid gland (hyperthyroidism). Taking the combined oral contraceptive pill, and the menopause, can also disrupt the hormone balance and lead to carpal tunnel syndrome.
- Other conditions, such as pregnancy, obesity, and diabetes mellitus are sometimes associated with carpal tunnel syndrome. Some of these conditions can cause water retention which can lead to swelling in the wrist.
- Repetitive activities/sustained postures such as in typing, and the use of power tools can irritate the nerve.

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What should you do?

Resting your wrist by reducing repetitive squeezing and/or gripping activities and keeping your wrist in a neutral position for these activities may help to relieve your symptoms. Losing weight (if you are over weight) will help too. If you have a medical condition, such as arthritis, then treating it may also help. More specific treatments include:

- Wrist splints, to keep your wrists in a position that maximises room in the carpal tunnel. Your GP or physiotherapist may be able to provide you with wrist splints.
- Medication, such as aspirin and ibuprofen can be used to reduce inflammation and relieve pain. Any medication that you take should be discussed with your GP or pharmacist.
- Wrist and finger exercises may help to relieve the pressure on the median nerve. However, there has not been enough research to tell whether such exercises are effective, and there is a risk that they could make the condition worse. You should ask your GP or physiotherapist for advice.
- Steroid injection can reduce the irritation around the nerve and reduce symptoms
- Surgery can be considered where symptoms are considerable and do not respond to other measures.

When symptoms are mild, no treatment may be an option. In 1 in 3 cases, the symptoms disappear within six months, without treatment. Where the condition develops during pregnancy, the symptoms usually disappear soon after the birth.

Can you prevent it?

It is important to adopt good working practices. For example, when using a computer for prolonged periods, you should ensure that your workstation is set up correctly, and that you maintain a good posture. You may find that using a wrist rest helps, and you should also take regular short screen breaks.

If you are using power tools check your wrist position and take regular breaks where possible. If you are overweight, adjusting your diet and losing a reasonable amount of weight will help to alleviate the symptoms of carpal tunnel syndrome, and prevent the condition from occurring in future.

Carpal Tunnel Syndrome may be difficult to prevent in some cases when it occurs following a wrist injury, or a bone condition, such as rheumatoid arthritis.

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