

Osteoarthritis at the Base of the Thumb

The aim of this information sheet is to give you some understanding of the problems you may be experiencing with your thumb. It has been divided into sections, describing what we know about the hand and your treatment options. It is not a substitute for professional healthcare advice and should be used in conjunction with verbal information given by your GP or Physiotherapist.

Arthritis means inflammation in the joints. Osteoarthritis is the most common form of arthritis in the UK affecting up to 8.5 million people. It is caused by changes in the cartilage that cover the ends of the bone within the joint. The cartilage becomes thin and rough, and the bone ends can rub together. Osteoarthritis can develop at any age, but usually appears after the age of 45.

What are the Symptoms?

- Pain: To start with the pain may be only on using the thumb.
- Stiffness of the thumb and some loss of ability to open the thumb away from the hand.
- Difficulty with gripping things and you may feel you are losing power in your hand. You may have difficulty with tasks such as opening jars, turning a key in the lock.
- Tenderness if you press on the base of the thumb
- In advanced cases, there is a bump at the base of the thumb and the middle thumb joint may hyperextend, giving a zigzag appearance.



How common is it?

Many things may play a role in the OA developing:

- Age. OA becomes more common with age.
- Genetics. There is some evidence that OA runs in families.
- Your sex. Women are more likely to develop OA than men.
- Previous joint injury, damage or deformity. For example, this may include previous joint infection, a previous fracture (break in the bone) around a joint, or a previous ligament injury that caused a joint to become unstable.
- Occupational overuse of a joint.

What tests may be done?

The main way we diagnose osteoarthritis is through what you tell us and examining your wrist, hand and thumb. We may arrange an X ray to confirm the diagnosis.

What are my treatment options?

It is important to try and protect the joint from activities that make your symptoms worse. This may involve not trying to do too much at one time. Spread your activities throughout the day.

Using a splint to support the thumb and wrist. Rigid splints (metal or plastic) are effective but make thumb use difficult. A flexible neoprene rubber support may be easier to use. It is important to control your pain. Your GP or pharmacist may suggest painkillers or anti-inflammatory drugs.

A physiotherapist may suggest exercises to help stretch and strengthen the joint and muscles.

If your symptoms are constant and you are having problems with day to day activities an injection of hydrocortisone may give temporary relief. This can be discussed with your GP or Physiotherapist.

In very severe cases your physiotherapist or GP will refer you to a hand surgeon to discuss the possibility or suitability for surgery.

Medication

Many people use medication to help them remain active and to cope with their pain and symptoms. It is recommended you take any medication as prescribed.

Work

It is usually recommended that you try to stay at work, or get back to work as soon as possible. You do not need to be pain or symptom free to return to work. Research has shown the longer you are off work the less likely it is that you return.

Exercises that may help your thumb

Exercise 1: Hold hand palm up and lift your thumb away from your palm as far as possible

Exercise 2: Hold hand “pinkie” side down and lift thumb up as far as possible

Exercise 3: Make wide circles with your thumb, in both directions.

Try to stay positive. There is a lot you can do to help yourself. Most symptoms do settle with time.

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