

Do You Have Carpal Tunnel Syndrome?

By Dr. Angela Rowe, Blair Orthopedic Associates & Sports Medicine

Are you plagued by numbness and tingling? Do your hands wake you up a night? You may have symptoms of carpal tunnel syndrome.

Symptoms such as numbness and tingling, usually in the first three digits, are common in people with this condition. Other symptoms can include burning sensations in the fingers, night time pain, and weakness. People often complain of loss of feeling and difficulty holding small objects. They also can have numbness when they're holding a newspaper or even driving.

Understanding the Causes

The wrist area is an enclosed space made up of the wrist bones, tendons, and nerves. Swelling in this area can put pressure on the nerves which can produce symptoms. A variety of conditions can increase susceptibility of this disorder such as repetitive work, diabetes, hypothyroid, and pregnancy. Other conditions can also mimic symptoms of carpal tunnel syndrome. These include arthritis of the neck and arm, pinched nerve in the neck and elbow, and also other shoulder and elbow problems.

The diagnosis can be made by the patient's clinical presentation along with the physical examination. A nerve test called an EMG can confirm the diagnosis. The test involves the use of fine needles to pin point the location of the problem and determine the severity. It is also used to differentiate between carpal tunnel syndrome from other nerve problems such as a pinched nerve in the neck.

Treatment

Night time splinting can alleviate mild symptoms of carpal tunnel syndrome. The splint immobilizes the wrist which allows the swelling to decrease. It also keeps the wrist from flexing, which can also aggravate the problem.

When splinting is ineffective, a cortisone injection can be an option. Cortisone is a strong anti-inflammatory medication used to improve the swelling and inflammation in the wrist and hand.

Carpal tunnel surgery is an option only when conservative measures fail. To relieve the pressure and pain associated with this condition, a relatively simple outpatient surgery can be performed. The procedure takes about 30-45 minutes and involves releasing the transverse carpal ligament. This alleviates the pressure on the nerve and also provides more space in the carpal tunnel. This procedure can be done arthroscopically and also as an open procedure. Recovery time is quick and patients can return to work in 4-6 weeks.

Although carpal tunnel surgery is considered relatively minor, your risks increase if you are a smoker, overweight, or in poor health.

Your doctor is your best resource. Contact your physician if you have any of these symptoms or if you have any questions.

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Dr. Angela Rowe is the first and only female board-certified orthopedic surgeon in Blair County. She has a special interest in joint replacement as well as general orthopedics. Dr. Rowe's emphasis in orthopedics is to return her patients to their normal life style.