

DE QUERVAIN'S TENOSYNOVITIS

The problem.

De Quervain's tenosynovitis is caused by inflammation around the thumb tendons as they pass through a canal at the wrist. It can be caused by mild trauma which if not treated can lead to a vicious cycle of inflammation and pain. This pain is especially bad on thumb movement.

What does treatment involve?

The diagnosis is made with a combination of history and clinical examination. There is often pain at the base of the thumb at wrist level. There may be obvious swelling. It may be necessary to obtain an x-ray to exclude other common conditions that occur in this area. An ultrasound scan is sometimes indicated. Treatment can involve splinting alone, a combination of splinting and a steroid injection, or surgery. If treated with a splint and steroid injection it will take approximately 6 weeks for the symptoms to resolve. If conservative treatment does not work then surgery is usually performed under a general anaesthetic as a day case. An incision is made at the base of the thumb at the wrist. The tight band compressing the tendons is released. The wound is usually closed by a dissolving suture. A plaster of Paris splint is usually applied. The surgery takes about 20 minutes.

What happens after surgery?

You will usually be able to go home later the same day. It is very important that you keep the hand elevated to reduce swelling and pain. A local anaesthetic will have been given when you were asleep and will last for a few hours. You will be provided with a sling and pain killers. It is important you keep the dressing clean and dry for at least the first week and you can shower with a plastic bag over the hand. You will need to wear the splint for at least 2 weeks.

What are the advantages?

In most instances the symptoms will improve soon after surgery.

What are the complications?

Bleeding and infection is rare. Sometimes a thick scar can develop, especially if the incision has been slow to heal. A small number of patients experience pain in the scar that may take several weeks to settle down. There is a small risk of injury to the tendons and nerve, but this is very uncommon. You may get some temporary numbness over the back of the index finger and thumb. Rarely, a condition known as Chronic Regional Pain Syndrome can develop which is treated with intensive hand therapy. Recurrence following surgery is extremely uncommon.
