

GANGLION

The problem.

A ganglion is a fluid filled sac that can arise from either a joint or from the tendon sheath. They are one of the most common lumps in the hand. They most commonly occur at the back of the wrist but can occur anywhere in the hand. They sometimes occur after minor trauma but often occur spontaneously. In a small percentage of cases they disappear themselves however they can fluctuate in size and persist. They can be painful and sometimes ache.

What does treatment involve?

The diagnosis is made with a combination of history and clinical examination. The lump is often characteristic but sometimes an x-ray is required to exclude underlying joint damage. Rarely, an ultrasound scan may be needed. Treatment can involve a "watch and wait" approach as sometimes they disappear themselves, or surgery can be performed. Some surgeons use a needle to aspirate ganglion, however they commonly come back and there is a risk of introducing infection into the joint. We therefore recommend surgical excision. Surgery can be performed under either a general or local anaesthetic depending on where the ganglion is and on its size. The ganglion is excised through an incision and the wound closed with either dissolving or non-dissolving sutures depending of the location of the ganglion. A plaster of Paris splint is sometimes applied, otherwise a bulky dressing will be in place. The surgery takes between 20-60 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 even if you had a general anaesthetic 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.

What are the advantages?

The ganglion will have been removed by 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. Depending on the location of the ganglion there is a small risk of injury to the tendons, vessels and nerves, but this is very uncommon. Rarely, a condition known as Chronic Regional Pain Syndrome can develop which is treated with intensive hand therapy. Despite surgery recurrence can occur, but the risk of this is much lower than after other types of treatment. If it does recur it can be re-excised through the old incision.
