

TRIGGER FINGER or THUMB

The problem.

Trigger finger or thumb occurs when your finger gets stuck on flexion and becomes difficult or painful to extend. It is caused by swelling and narrowing around the canal the tendon travels in, usually within the palm. It can occur for no obvious reason, but is commoner in patients with diabetes, rheumatoid arthritis and can occur during pregnancy.

What does treatment involve?

The diagnosis is made with a combination of history and clinical examination. Sometimes it is possible to reproduce the triggering. Often it is tender and swollen around the tendon in the palm with a palpable "nodule". If it is very mild it can be treated with a steroid injection. This sometimes only provides temporary relief, in which case you may want to consider surgery. Surgery is usually performed under a local anaesthetic. Once the injection is administered you should not feel any pain. When the hand is numb an incision is made in the palm of the hand at the base of the affected finger and the tight band (pulley) compressing the tendon is released. In rheumatoid arthritis the inflamed lining around the tendon is removed and sometimes it is necessary to cut a small part of one of the tendons. This does not result in any functional problem. The wound is closed with non-dissolving sutures which are removed approximately 2 weeks later. You will have a bulky dressing in place but will be able to use the hand almost normally. The surgery usually takes about 15 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. The local anaesthetic will last 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. The sutures will be removed at approximately 2 weeks. You should have normal hand function after about 4 weeks.

What are the advantages?

In most instances the triggering will resolve immediately 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 tendon, 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. Recurrence following surgery is extremely uncommon.