

Possible complications after hand surgery

i Important advice for patients following hand surgery

About this booklet

The purpose of this booklet is to provide information about the possible risks following hand surgery. With all procedures there are some risks. It is important that you understand the risks so that you can make a decision whether you want to have the procedure performed.

Risks

Swelling

Swelling is common in the operated area.

Elevating your hand and moving your fingers will help keep swelling down.

If the swelling increases and the affected area looks red, this may indicate an infection. If you suspect you are developing an infection, you should contact your General Practitioner or the Hand Clinic.

Bruising

Bruising is common after operations. There may be some minor seepage from your wound following the surgery and this will settle over time.

Bleeding

If you experience steady bleeding from your wound, elevate your hand and press on the wound to stop the bleeding. If it does not stop, depending on the severity of the bleed, contact your General Practitioner, Accident and Emergency or the Hand Clinic.

Infection

Superficial infections are common (5%) after hand surgery and cause redness, swelling, pain and pus around the stitches. These tend to settle quickly with oral antibiotics and regular dressings.

Deep infections around the tendons and bones are rare and may need admission to hospital for intravenous antibiotics and further surgery. These can cause longer-term complications, such as stiffness.

Scarring

Every operation leaves scars.

Your scar may initially be tender and thickened. It should soften and become more comfortable with time. Firm massage should help the scar improve.

Your scar may be numb permanently.

You will be provided you with information about hand care after surgery.

Delayed wound healing

Your wound will heal with dressings but may take a few weeks to heal completely.

Sometimes the wound splits open or takes longer to heal. The reasons for this may include infection, bleeding or poor blood supply to the wound edges.

Stiffness

Stiffness may be due to swelling, scar tissue or immobility. It can be made worse by infection or other complications. You can help to avoid stiffness by keeping your fingers moving after your surgery.

Damage to adjacent structures

Other nerves, vessels and structures could be inadvertently damaged during the operation. This is more common in operations that occur after trauma or when there is a lot of scar tissue at the site of the surgery.

Complex Regional Pain Syndrome (CRPS)

Complex Regional Pain Syndrome (CRPS) is chronic pain syndrome that causes pain, stiffness and swelling which are out of proportion to the surgery.

The pain may be experienced as burning and like an electric shock. If the pain is not controlled by simple painkillers, contact the Hand Clinic.

It is not fully understood and surgeons cannot predict who will be affected.

Mild CRPS occurs in 5% of patients and will have good resolution.

Severe cases are very rare but may leave the hand permanently stiff and swollen.

Cold intolerance

Cold intolerance is very common after procedures on your finger but the reason for this is not clear.

It develops over the first three months following surgery and may remain fairly constant over the first 12 months. It may improve over subsequent years but rarely resolves completely.

This may cause you difficulty working in cold environments. You can protect your hands from both wind-chill and cold by wearing insulated gloves.

Further information

If you have any questions or concerns, please email handsurgery@gjnh.scot.nhs.uk or contact the orthopaedic clinic during office hours on 0141 951 5553. For out of hours, you should contact the Senior Nurse via the switchboard on 0141 951 5000.

Post hand surgery videos



Stiffness



Scar management

Notes

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