

De Quervain's Syndrome

i Important information for patients who suffer from De Quervain's syndrome

About this booklet

The purpose of this booklet is to tell you about De Quervain's Syndrome, its causes and symptoms. It also explains your treatment options.

What is De Quervain's Syndrome?

It is a condition that affects two of the tendons that help to move your thumb. These tendons run from your forearm through a tunnel just before the wrist joint. The tunnel helps the tendons to function by keeping them in the right place, like a pulley. Inside the tunnel the tendons are lined with a special tissue which lubricates them, allowing them to run smoothly. In De Quervain's syndrome, the tunnel becomes thickened so then tendons cannot move so freely and can cause the lining to become inflamed.

What causes De Quervain's Syndrome?

In most people there will be no obvious cause. It is more common in people with diabetes, thyroid disease or rheumatoid arthritis. It is also seen in mothers of young babies. There are no occupations that are more associated with De Quervain's syndrome, however, some people may experience it affecting the ability to carry out their job.

What are the symptoms?

Pain and tenderness is felt at the side of the wrist near the base of the thumb. This can be made worse by straightening the thumb away from the palm or fingers. You might notice some swelling in this area too. Some people feel a creaky sensation in this area.

How is it diagnosed?

The diagnosis is made from the symptoms and examining your wrist. X-rays or other investigations are not normally needed.

Do I need treatment?

In most people the symptoms will go away without treatment over about a year with no special management. Although it is painful, it is safe to use your hand as your pain allows, as you will not cause damage or harm to the tissues.

How can I help my symptoms?

Some of these measures might help to reduce your symptoms:

- Activity modification: small changes in the way you do things might help or you might be able to avoid activities which worsen the pain.
- Splints: splints that support the thumb can help some people but others find they cause tenderness over the tendons in the tunnel.
- Physiotherapy: exercises to help the tendons glide more smoothly might help.
- Steroid injections: This is a very strong anti-inflammatory injection. They can significantly reduce the pain from De Quervain's syndrome in the short term. Steroid injections come with some small risks and your surgeon or therapist will be able to discuss these with you.
- Surgery: If your symptoms have not improved with time and simple measures, then surgery can be considered. This is usually carried out under local anaesthetic and the tunnel at the wrist is released, allowing the tendons to run more freely. There is a risk that a small nerve in the area can be damaged or become trapped in scar tissue which can be more painful than the underlying condition. Most operations go well with no complications. If you are considering surgery you should also look at the leaflet "complications of hand surgery".

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.

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