

“is it carpal tunnel syndrome?”

Our experts talk about what the signs of CTS are, and explain what you can do to feel better.



The physiatrist says...

If you're feeling a burning or numbness in your palm and fingers, especially your thumb, index and middle fingers, and it gets worse at night (sleeping with wrists flexed can increase pain), there's a good chance it's carpal tunnel syndrome. Your carpal tunnel is the channel of ligaments, nerves, tendons and bones in your wrist. When it narrows (from an injury or repetitive action), the nerves can get compressed and become numb.

A doctor such as a physiatrist (an MD who specializes in treating musculoskeletal issues) or orthopedist can diagnose you. The most effective exam is an electrodiagnostic test known as an EMG (electromyogram), which checks the health of the nerves and muscles in your arms, hands and wrists. If you're diagnosed early, a number of treatments can help. Research shows that acupuncture can release tension on the tendons and nerves and ease the numbness. Occupational therapy can help reduce swelling, and some doctors also give a steroid injection (although it does carry some risk of nerve damage).

As far as over-the-counter anti-inflammatory meds go, they probably won't help your symptoms, according to research. If you don't see an improvement after four weeks, it may be time to talk to a hand surgeon about whether you need surgery.

ROBERT SCHJELMAN, MD, physiatrist, Petaluma, CA



The occupational therapist says...

If you're having persistent pain or tingling, a therapist can teach you certain stretches to help the tendons and nerves glide more easily and decrease pressure in the carpal tunnel. We also look at how you're holding your wrists during the day. If you work on a computer or at another job in

Click much? Using a mouse could be your pain culprit.



which you use your hands constantly, take a break at least every 2 hours and try this stretch: Place your hand palm up in front of you (toward the ceiling), elbow bent and wrist straight. Applying light pressure with your other hand, slowly stretch your fingers and thumb back. Hold for a count of 3, then release. Repeat 5 times. And be careful about using an over-the-counter wrist brace: Make sure it keeps your wrist straight, and don't wear it 24/7, because it could weaken your forearm and hand muscles.

LINDA KLEIN, occupational therapist and certified hand therapist, Milwaukee



The ergonomics expert says...

If you log lots of hours on a computer, especially if you use a mouse (a common CTS cause), check your desk setup. When you're sitting at a keyboard, keep it about arm's length from the computer screen. When typing, your wrists should be straight, not bent up or down. Raise your chair so you're a bit higher than your keyboard. (Sitting lower or too close to it means you're working with your forearms, which can lead to CTS.) And keep the room temperature warm—when the air gets too cold, the blood vessels in your fingers narrow, which restricts blood flow to the nerves and muscles.

Also note: Another big risk factor for wrist and hand pain is gardening, since you're repetitively using your hands and forearms in awkward positions. Be sure to use tools that fit your hands comfortably.

ALAN HEDGE, PhD, director, Human Factors and Ergonomics Laboratory, Cornell University