



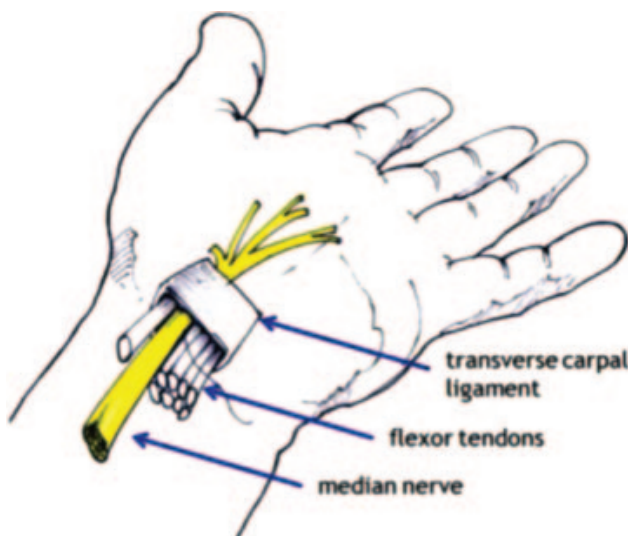
CONDITION

What is Carpal Tunnel Syndrome?

This is a common condition in which one of the nerves supplying your hand is compressed at the wrist.

The carpal tunnel is a space between the bones of your wrist (near the back of your hand) and a strap across the bones (on the front of your wrist).

All the tendons to your fingers run in the tunnel, below the strap, along with the median nerve. The strap is called the transverse carpal ligament.



What causes carpal tunnel syndrome?

Anything decreasing the space in the tunnel can give rise to pressure symptoms. Local injury, tenosynovitis (swelling around the tendons), arthritis, diabetes, thyroid disease and pregnancy are commonly implicated but a cause is often not identified. It is commoner in women, probably because the tunnel is already smaller.

What symptoms does carpal tunnel syndrome give rise to?

A feeling of 'pins and needles' or tingling in the thumb, index and middle finger is commonly described. This is often worse at night, if reading a newspaper or driving. The fingers may feel 'dead'. Pain in the hand, wrist or arm often occurs. Later on the hand feels clumsy and weak and dextrous tasks (doing buttons up etc) become difficult. You may find yourself inadvertently dropping things. If the pressure is severe, or continues for many months, the nerve can become permanently damaged leading to numbness all the time in the tips of the affected fingers.

How is the diagnosis confirmed?

A good description of the symptoms and a careful examination is often sufficient to make the diagnosis. Other conditions can mimic carpal tunnel syndrome and may need to be excluded with xrays or blood tests. If there is still doubt electrical tests of the nerves can be arranged. A successful steroid injection (see below) may confirm the diagnosis and give symptom relief.

What is the treatment of carpal tunnel syndrome?

Rest and treating exacerbating factors may resolve mild symptoms. A removable support to hold the wrist straight at night can be helpful. A local anaesthetic and steroid injection around the nerve in the carpal tunnel can reduce swelling and relieve pressure but the effects are often short-lived.

For persistent symptoms a small operation, usually carried out under local anaesthetic as a day case, is almost guaranteed to relieve the pressure effects of carpal tunnel syndrome. Essentially the strap ligament that forms the top of the carpal tunnel is divided to take the pressure off the nerve and the skin closed over the top. In severe cases finger numbness can persist following surgery but the 'pins and needles' sensation and night discomfort stops.