

Argus Orthopaedic Zone

Why Does My Darn Thumb Hurt!?

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Transforming patient information into patient understanding.

Arthritis at the base of the thumb - a diagnosis that is frequently missed. The old saying in medicine is "If you don't think of the diagnosis, you will never make it."

In the office I have seen patients with arthritis of the thumb diagnosed elsewhere as carpal tunnel syndrome. The symptoms of the two conditions do overlap somewhat. Sometimes arthritis at the base of the thumb exists for months or years before it is diagnosed.

Often patients have not had an x-ray of the hand and wrist. If they have, the condition may be under diagnosed on the x-ray report which the primary care physician uses for diagnosis.

Diagnosis

Careful history of the location and character of the pain is important. Thorough exam always shows tenderness to pressure at the base of the thumb where it joins the wrist. Good hand x-rays read by the person examining the patient confirms the diagnosis every time.

What To Do?

Conservative treatment is always tried first.

- Anti-inflammatory medication. Advil etc.
- Prescription medication
- Theragesic or similar rub to painful area
- Thumb/hand splint
- Injection of joint with anti-inflammatory medication under x-ray control
- Occupational therapy

If All Else Fails - Surgery

Thumb arthritis is caused by the joint at the base of the thumb wearing out and the bones begin to rub together. Pain. Ouch!

At surgery part of the bone is removed from the thumb joint through a small incision on the side of the thumb at the wrist.

In the space created, a pad of tissue is inserted as a spacer. I get this tissue from the Michigan Tissue Bank. The tissue space keeps the bones from rubbing together.

Surgery is done under a general anesthetic. Many patients can go home the same day.

After Surgery

The thumb is splinted for four weeks not giving you too much use of the hand and wrist during that time.

After that, gradual use of the hand is allowed out of the splint. It may take two or three months for strength to return to the hand and thumb.

The Message

Don't put up with hand pain, stiffness and weakness. There is always hope - if the correct diagnosis is made. Don't forget. History, exam, x-rays interpreted by the person examining you.

For much more information about hand problems and arthritis of the thumb access our office teaching website www.orthopodsurgeon.com, which can take you to Your Orthopaedic Connection.

Our goal is simple - To help people return to more pain free, functional lives.

Good health. Good life. All the best to you.

Be well.

Dr. Haverbush