



Hand Therapy

Osteoarthritis at the base of the thumb

What is it?

In a normal joint, cartilage covers the ends of the bones and allows them to move smoothly and without pain. When a joint has osteoarthritis the cartilage wears out and the bones may begin to rub on each other. This can cause pain at the bottom of the thumb and can make it difficult to grip or pinch, for example when doing buttons up.

What is the cause?

This joint is particularly at risk from normal wear and tear during hand use. It is more common in women over the age of 40 years. Past injuries to this joint may increase the risk of developing osteoarthritis.

What are the signs and symptoms?

The most common symptom is a deep ache at the base of the thumb. Pain is often worse when doing gripping activities e.g. writing, turning doorknobs and using keys. As the problem worsens, strength may reduce and the bottom of the thumb may change shape.

Treatment

- Rest and splints to stop the activities that worsen the condition.
- Anti – inflammatory medication.
- Hand therapy – this may include exercises to strengthen the base of the



Patient Information

thumb, splinting and pain relieving treatments.

- Injection of a steroid and local anaesthetic to help reduce the inflammation and the swelling, this may need to be done under X-ray imaging.
- Surgery.

Surgery

The operation involves removing one of the bones called the trapezium, which forms part of the worn joint. The space left by the bone then fills up with thick scar tissue. It is usually done as a day case under a general anaesthetic. Stitches will be in for 10 – 14 days; these are usually removed at your GP practice.

After the operation you will have either a large bandage or plaster cast depending on your consultant's preference. Your consultant may also ask you to wear a supportive splint. You will be encouraged to exercise by your therapist, to ensure that you regain movement and strength.

You can expect to have some discomfort for the first three to four months following surgery. In some people this may last as long as nine months.

Pinch and power grip which are usually weak before surgery will improve in nine to twelve months following the surgery. Function in the hand will also improve over this time.

Complications

A small number of patients may experience the following:

- Stiffness
- Prolonged swelling
- Inflammation
- Prolonged pain
- Nerve irritability
- Infection

Patient Information

How long will I be off work?

This largely depends on whether the operation has been on your dominant hand and the type of work that you do. Discuss this with your clinician.

When can I drive?

You can drive when you can make a full pain-free fist.

If you experience any problems please do not hesitate to contact your GP or the Day surgery Unit.

Further information sheets will be available to you when you leave the hospital

- Post Operative Hand and Arm instructions
- Care following a general anaesthetic

Further Information

If you need further information please contact your Therapy Department:
University Hospital, Coventry and Warwickshire: Tel 024 7696 6016
Rugby, St Cross Hospital: Tel 01788 663257

For further information please visit our hand service web site
<http://tinyurl.com/uhcwhand>

The Trust has access to interpreting and translation services. If you need this information in another language or format please contact 024 7696 6861 and we will do our best to meet your needs.

The Trust operates a smoke free policy.

Patient Information

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Document History

Department:	Hand Therapy
Contact:	26016
Updated:	November 2024
Review:	November 2026
Version:	6.2
Reference:	HIC/LFT/872/09