



## Orthopaedics Department

# 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 painlessly. 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 base of the thumb and can make it difficult to grip or pinch grip, for example doing buttons

### 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 activities that involve gripping e.g. writing, turning door knobs and using keys. As the problem worsens, a loss of strength, and an alteration in the shape of the base of the thumb may occur.

### Treatment

- Rest and splints to stop the activities that aggravate the condition
- Anti – inflammatory medication
- Physiotherapy – this may include exercises to strengthen the base of the 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 dense 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.



## Patient Information

After the operation you will have either a large bandage or plaster cast depending on your consultant's preference. You may need to wear a supportive splint at your consultant's request. You will be encouraged to exercise by your physiotherapist, 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 period may be last for 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

### 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 are involved in. Discuss this with your clinician.

### When can I drive?

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

In the event of you experiencing 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.

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Document History

# Patient Information

Author	Lynne Nicholls
Department	Orthopaedics
Contact Tel No	26861
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