

## Trauma and Orthopaedics

# Trigger finger (or trigger thumb)

Trigger finger affects the movement of tendons that connect the muscles in your forearm to the fingers and thumb. The tendons in the fingers and thumb run in a sheath. This is an outer covering designed to lubricate the tendon and allow smooth movement with minimal friction. The tendon also runs through a series of tunnels called pulleys, which keep it close to the bone at all times as it moves.

In trigger finger, the smooth running of the tendon is damaged. The sheath and/or pulley become thickened, and the tendon may develop a nodule inside it. The tendon nodule can get stuck within the tunnel, particularly upon waking or when bending and straightening the finger. Trigger finger usually affects the thumb, middle or ring finger. More than one finger can be affected, and it may develop in both hands.

### Who develops it?

It can happen in men and women usually in middle-age, but all age groups may develop the condition. Certain conditions, such as diabetes or rheumatoid arthritis, increase the risk of developing trigger finger.

### Treatment

Treatment depends upon the severity of your symptoms and how long you have had them.

### Injection

Injection of a steroid into the sheath of the tendon can help some people.



## Patient Information

Not all people respond to an injection, and for some the benefit may only be temporary. It is recommended you do not drive immediately after an injection, and all finger rings must be removed from the hand / finger being injected.

## Surgery

A small operation to free the finger or thumb that is triggering (or may even have become locked), can be performed as a day-case procedure. Local anaesthesia is performed with 1 or 2 injections into the hand, then a small wound is made over the site of the nodule. The tunnel (pulley) is cut to allow free gliding of the tendon. A tourniquet may be used on the upper arm to prevent bleeding during the surgery. This can feel uncomfortable but is usually only inflated for 15 minutes. Stitches are removed in 10 to 14 days, these are usually removed at your GP practice. The hand will be bandaged for the first 2 to 3 days after, which free movement is allowed.

## What are the possible complications?

- The scar may be sensitive and tender but generally this settles down within 3 months.
- The finger or thumb may also develop stiffness after the surgery, but this usually responds to hand therapy.
- A very small number of people develop infection, persistent pain, stiffness or swelling in the hand.
- Infection can be treated with antibiotics, but occasionally requires further surgery.
- Recurrence is rare.

## How long will you be off work and when can you drive?

**Driving:** It is your responsibility to make sure you are safe to drive. You can discuss this further with your treating clinician if you remain unsure. Please consider bringing someone with you, to avoid having to drive home yourself immediately after any procedure. You may wish to consider waiting until you can grip the steering wheel tightly without any distracting pain before resuming driving.

## Patient Information

**Returning to work** will depend on your type of job. Light or desk-based jobs may be possibly after 2 to 3 weeks depending on your recovery progress. For heavy manual labour, it is advisable to wait 6 to 8 weeks before resuming work. You should be able to do most everyday activities with any splints or strapping that may have been provided. Please speak to your doctor about this, and do not resume sporting activities until you are told that it is safe to do so.

## Further information

For further information please contact:

- The day surgery unit at University Hospital Coventry on 024 7696 6861/024 7696 6868 or at Hospital of St. Cross (Rugby) on 01788 663264
- Plaster room technicians at University Hospital Coventry on 024 7696 6909 or at Hospital of St. Cross (Rugby) on 01788 669143
- Specialist hand surgery nurse/hand-coordinator on 024 7696 5072
- Hand Therapy at University Hospital Coventry & Warwickshire on 024 7696 6016 or at Hospital of St. Cross (Rugby) on 01788 663257

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