



## Orthopaedic Department

# Ulnar nerve decompression

### What is an ulnar nerve decompression?

The Ulnar nerve lies at the back of the elbow at the area commonly known as the 'funny bone'. The ulnar nerve supplies the sensation to the little and ring fingers and also the border of the forearm and wrist on the same side of the hand. This nerve also supplies some of the small muscles in the hand which allow you to do tasks requiring dexterity (e.g. doing up buttons, picking up small objects etc.)

On bending and straightening the elbow the nerve moves within its tunnel, sometimes this movement can cause thickening of the tissues around the nerve. The thickening, plus the shape of the tunnel can tether the nerve and put pressure on the nerve.

### Symptoms

Pain, weakness and altered sensation such as pins and needles and numbness may be experienced in the little and ring fingers. You might also find it difficult doing fine or dexterous tasks.

### Treatment

You may be referred for some electrical tests to see how severe the compression is. If the nerve is badly compressed the recovery may not be complete. However, surgery should ensure that the problem does not get worse. Following these tests you will be advised if surgery is needed.

**Before you come into the hospital for your surgery please make sure that you have removed all jewellery, especially rings on the hand that is to be operated on. Also please remove any nail varnish, gel or false nails**



## Patient Information

### What happens at surgery?

- Surgery is performed as a day-case procedure under a general anaesthetic (being put to sleep) or a regional anaesthetic (having the whole arm numbed with anaesthetic injections but you remain awake). A cut is then made at the back of the elbow.
- The nerve is released and the wound then stitched.
- Occasionally the nerve is unstable or moves around too much after it has been released or decompressed. At this point your surgeon may do one of three things:
  1. simply finish the operation and observe you in the clinic to see if it becomes a symptomatic problem;
  2. make the cut bigger, and move the nerve away from the *funny bone* (a transposition procedure);
  3. file down the *funny bone* to make the movement less obvious (a medial epicondylectomy). Your surgeon should have explained these options with you before the surgery, to allow you to express any preference you may have.
- A large bandage is applied for the first 48 hours; this is then removed to allow gentle exercise.

### What are the possible complications?

- The nerve may not improve following the surgery despite having the pressure removed from it.
- As with any surgical procedure there is a small risk of infection.
- Occasionally persistent swelling, joint stiffness and pain may occur.
- Scar tenderness or sensitivity is not unusual. Although this has normally improved by six weeks, it may persist for up to three months. Massage to the scar can be helpful to relieve these symptoms.

If you should you have any concerns please take the opportunity to discuss them when you are admitted for surgery.

### How long will I be off work?

You can expect to return to work within a few weeks of surgery depending upon the nature of your job. Jobs involving heavy work may require you to remain off work for up to six weeks.

### When can I drive?

You may find driving difficult during the first two weeks after the operation. You can drive after your stitches are removed and when you can make a full pain free fist.

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

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

## Patient Information

In the event of you experiencing any problems please do not hesitate to contact your GP or the Day surgery Unit.

### 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>

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