Carpal Tunnel Syndrome

Carpal tunnel syndrome is a common, painful problem found in those who perform constant, repetitive tasks with their hands, such as typists, musicians and line assembly-line workers. It is caused by the compression (squeezing) of the median nerve that runs through the wrist. The nerve lies in a small space like a tunnel between the carpal ligament and other muscles and tissue at the base of the hand. This is why it is called carpal tunnel syndrome.

The carpal tunnel can be compressed or narrowed by the swelling of the surrounding tendon sheaths, recent or improperly healed fractures, tumors, and other hand abnormalities.

The syndrome occasionally occurs during pregnancy due to swelling of the hands and feet. Injuries to the wrist can also cause the condition.

Early symptoms include a burning and tingling pain along the median nerve. This eventually becomes an aching pain that can radiate up into the forearm and occasionally into the shoulder, neck and even the chest. The pain is made worse by manual activity, especially bending your hand forward or backward at the wrist. Patients complain that it is most bothersome at night, probably because they're trying to sleep and not thinking of other things.

Your doctor can perform an examination and tests to determine if the condition is merely a mechanical problem from repetitive use or swelling, or if there is some other underlying disorder that should be treated.

The primary remedy for carpal tunnel syndrome is to stop doing the repetitive hand movements that caused the problem. The hand and wrist and forearm can be splinted to allow better healing and reduce the swelling.

In some cases the doctor may inject cortisone into the wrist to reduce inflammation. Physical therapy is a very successful way of healing the wrists and teaching the patients to use their hands differently to prevent future problems.

Some patients with carpal tunnel syndrome are given non-steroidal, anti-inflammatory medications. A corrective surgery is also available to alleviate the syndrome, but should be reserved until other treatments have failed.