

Carpal tunnel syndrome surgery

Information for patients

This information sheet answers some of the questions you may have about having **carpal tunnel syndrome surgery**. It explains the risks and the benefits of the procedure and what you can expect when you come to hospital. If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to speak to the doctors or nurses caring for you.

What is carpal tunnel syndrome?

The carpal tunnel is a small tunnel that runs from the bottom of your wrist to your lower palm.

The median nerve, which supplies feeling and power to the thumb side of your hand, passes through this tunnel with the tendons that you use to bend your fingers. It also passes under a tough band-like structure (the flexor retinaculum ligament). There is not very much space in this area so there is no room for the tendons to expand. Carpal tunnel syndrome happens when there is too much pressure on one of the nerves (the median nerves) in your wrist. If you have any swelling, your median nerve gets compressed and this interferes with the signals it sends out. Symptoms are worse at night because fluid in your limbs tends to 'pool' or collect in one place.

Symptoms are worse at night because fluid in your limbs tends to 'pool' or collect in one place and increase the pressure on your nerve. They include:

- numbness and tingling in your fingers and thumbs
- difficulty sleeping
- problems with dropping things and doing up buttons
- discomfort in your hand, forearm and even your shoulder.

What causes carpal tunnel syndrome?

Causes include:

- wear and tear
- fluid retention, which is common during pregnancy and at certain times during a woman's monthly menstrual cycle
- joint dislocations and fractures, which can narrow the tunnel
- arthritis, which can cause the ligament that covers the carpal tunnel to thicken.

In most cases we cannot find an exact cause for carpal tunnel syndrome, but if you are diabetic you are more likely to get this condition.

What is carpal tunnel syndrome surgery?

It involves making a cut along the front of your wrist and the palm of your hand to release the tight ligament (flexor retinaculum) that is squashing the nerve.

Why do I need surgery?

It relieves the symptoms of carpal tunnel syndrome by removing the pressure on the nerve. After the operation, your symptoms often go away quickly.

What are the benefits?

- It relieves pain.
- You will be able to use your hand fully again.

What are the risks?

There are risks with all surgery, but for this procedure they are relatively small and usually manageable. They include:

- a low risk of infection
- lasting numbness, depending on how much the nerve was compressed before the operation
- a very small risk of more pain or numbness caused by further damage to the median nerve.

Your anaesthetist will discuss with you the most appropriate type of anaesthetic for this operation and any associated risks.

Are there any alternatives?

Alternatives include:

- avoiding activities that make your symptoms worse
- wearing a splint at night to relieve symptoms
- having a steroid injection in the carpal tunnel area of your wrist to ease symptoms.

Consent

We must by law obtain your written consent to any operation and some other procedures beforehand. Staff will explain the risks, benefits and alternatives before they ask you to sign a consent form. If you are unsure of any aspect of the treatment proposed, please do not hesitate to speak with a senior member of the staff again.

Who can I contact with queries and concerns?

Please contact a member of your consultant's team for more information.

Do I need to prepare for surgery?

Before your operation you will have a pre-assessment appointment with one of our nurses. They will carry out some screening tests which may include blood tests, MRSA swabs and an electrocardiogram (ECG). You will be asked questions about your health, medical history and your home circumstances. Please bring with you details of any medication you are currently taking.

You will be given information such as:

- when to stop eating and drinking in the hours before your operation
- whether you should stop taking your usual medications before going into hospital
- what to bring with you into hospital.

What happens during surgery?

You usually have a local anaesthetic. This 'freezes' a specific part of your body so you feel no pain in that area. It is injected into your wrist before the procedure and takes about five - ten minutes to start working.

The surgeon then makes a small cut in your wrist, so they can see the ligament. They will then cut the ligament and release pressure on the median nerve.

How long does surgery take?

It usually takes about 15 - 30 minutes.

What happens after surgery?

As you had a local anaesthetic you will be able to go home on the same day as soon as you feel well enough to leave the hospital. You will have your arm up in a sling so you will not be able to drive home, but you will be able to use public transport or a taxi.

You will have a bulky dressing and bandage that you need to leave on for 48 hours. You will also need to keep your hand raised in a sling for the first two days. Please make sure you keep the wound clean and dry.

Sometimes we use stitches that dissolve so they do not need to be removed. If we use non-dissolvable stitches you need to have these taken out after 10-14 days. You must not drive until you have the stitches removed.

Getting back to normal

You will find it awkward to do basic things such as washing, going to the toilet and dressing for a while after your operation. If you live alone, you may find it useful to arrange help at home. It takes about six weeks to recover, and you will need to take time off work. How much time depends on the type of job you do and when you feel ready to return. Your GP will advise you about this.

Will I need to come back to hospital?

We will tell you if you need to come back to the outpatient clinic before we discharge you home. If you do, we will send you an appointment date and time by post.

Long-term recovery

The pain you get at night with carpal tunnel syndrome often goes very quickly. Daytime numbness and weakness usually take longer to improve, and they may take a few weeks or even months to settle.

Occasionally, you may have strange feelings in the nerve as it recovers, but this is often a good sign.

Your wrist may ache for several weeks. This varies from patient to patient but it will eventually go away. It is common to feel pain at the base of your thumb, and this can last for some time. Your wound can also feel quite hard and thickened, but this generally settles.

Valuables

Where possible, please do not bring anything of value into hospital with you as we do not have the facilities to lock your valuables away. Our staff will treat your possessions with care, but the Trust cannot accept liability for the loss of personal items.

Sharing your information

We have teamed up with Guy's and St Thomas' Hospitals in a partnership known as King's Health Partners Academic Health Sciences Centre. We are working together to give our patients the best possible care, so you might find we invite you for appointments at Guy's or St Thomas'. To make sure everyone you meet always has the most up-to-date information about your health, we may share information about you between the hospitals.

Care provided by students

We provide clinical training where our students get practical experience by treating patients. Please tell your doctor or nurse if you do not want students to be involved in your care. Your treatment will not be affected by your decision.

PALS

The Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) is a service that offers support, information and assistance to patients, relatives and visitors. They can also provide help and advice if you have a concern or complaint that staff have not been able to resolve for you. The PALS office is located on the ground floor of the Hambleton Wing, near the main entrance on Bessemer Road - staff will be happy to direct you.

Tel: 020 3299 3601
Fax: 020 3299 3626
Email: kch-tr.PALS@nhs.net

You can also contact us by using our online form at www.kch.nhs.uk/contact/pals

If you would like the information in this leaflet in a different language or format, please contact PALS on 020 3299 1844.

www.kch.nhs.uk
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For more information, visit www.kingshealthpartners.org 