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COULD IT BE ... CARPAL TUNNEL SYNDROME?

BY DENISE NOYER-EREZ, LAC, FABORM

If you have any of these symptoms, it is important to immediately seek treatment to avoid permanent damage to the wrist nerve and muscles in the hand and thumb.

As Westlake Village Orthopedic, Hand Surgeon Dr. Glenn Cohen cleverly describes it, "The carpal tunnel does not connect Los Angeles to Catalina Island. It is, in fact, part of everyone's normal anatomy of the wrist. The carpal bones of the wrist and a strong ligament form the tunnel. The contents of the tunnel include the median nerve and a collection of tendons that bend the fingers and thumb."

Carpal tunnel syndrome affects up to

10%

of the population.

-Dr. Cohen



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» CAUSES

"Carpal tunnel syndrome affects up to 10 percent of the population," says Dr. Cohen. More frequent in women, the condition is usually caused by repetitive activities.

"In all cases, there is increased pressure on the median nerve inside the carpal tunnel," Dr. Cohen explains, noting that pregnancy, menopause, diabetes, rheumatoid arthritis, thyroid disorders and tumors can place added pressure on the nerve.

"Determining the exact reason your hand gets numb and tingles is very important before embarking on any course of treatment. It is equally important to make certain that diseases that mimic CTS are ruled out," says Dr. Cohen, adding, "find an orthopedic surgeon who has a Certificate of Added Qualifications in Surgery of the Hand (CAQSH) to diagnose the problem."

WHILE WORKING AT YOUR DESK, YOU BEGIN TO FEEL A BURNING, TINGLING SENSATION IN YOUR WRIST AND HAND. AT FIRST, YOU ARE NOT QUITE SURE WHAT IT IS, SO YOU IGNORE IT AND EXPECT IT TO GO AWAY. YOU CONTINUE TO IGNORE THIS REPEATED FEELING. DAYS LATER, YOU REACH FOR A BOTTLE OF WATER AND YOU CANNOT OPEN IT. YOU REALIZE IT IS BECOMING DIFFICULT TO DO THE THINGS YOU HAVE DONE SO MANY TIMES WITHOUT THINKING. YOU BEGIN TO DROP THINGS. EVEN BUTTONING YOUR SHIRT HAS NOW BECOME NEARLY IMPOSSIBLE. THE PAIN IN YOUR WRIST STARTS TO KEEP YOU UP AT NIGHT. FINALLY, IT HAS YOUR ATTENTION, AND YOU KNOW YOU SHOULD SEEK MEDICAL ADVICE. COULD THIS BE CARPAL TUNNEL SYNDROME (CTS)?

» SYMPTOMS

Carpal tunnel often causes an “electric-like” tingling in the thumb side of the hand, shooting pains and weakness of the thumb.

“Your doctor will listen to your complaints, examine your hand and wrist and then determine if additional studies are required,” says Dr. Cohen. Blood tests, X-rays, MRIs, and an electrophysiological exam can help diagnose the condition.

» TREATMENT

Seeking treatment early can prevent more extensive nerve damage. Splinting, therapy, anti-inflammatory drugs and supplements (turmeric and omega-3 work well for inflammation), cortisone injections, hand therapy and acupuncture have all been used to effectively treat CTS.

“If non-operative treatment is unsuccessful, or your condition is too advanced, then surgery is necessary,” says Dr. Cohen. A variety of techniques and procedures, often done on an out-patient basis, typically take under 30 minutes, he said.

From an Oriental medicine perspective, CTS is seen as an interruption of the flow of Qi (energy) and blood in the wrist area. This ancient medicine describes the cause of CTS in terms of “cold,” “dampness,” or “wind” that penetrate the muscles and sinews of the wrist, and disrupt the normal flow of Qi and blood (or as we know today, nerve conduction and blood flow).

Depending on the diagnosis, acupuncture points are selected and treated. The acupuncture treatment releases natural pain-relieving chemicals into the body to decrease inflammation, increase circulation and balance the nervous system to reduce pain. In addition, stretching exercises, herbal remedies and nutritional supplements are prescribed accordingly.

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» TREATMENT

Acupuncture not only treats CTS “locally” at the site of pain but can also help with many other conditions that accompany it, such as headaches, neck pain, sleepless nights, inflammation and swelling.

A recent study was released in the *Clinical Journal of Pain*, stating that acupuncture treatment was shown to be slightly more effective than taking oral steroids to relieve the pain. The study showed that patients receiving acupuncture two times a week for four weeks experienced relief that was just as effective as the corticosteroids for pain, numbness, tingling and weakness. For symptoms of night-time awakening and motor function, the acupuncture group had even better results.

Acupuncturists, being physicians of Chinese medicine, also take into account any underlying conditions that may contribute to the development of CTS, such as hormone changes in pregnancy and menopause, obesity, diabetes and arthritis.

Considerations to help prevent CTS include:

- **An ergonomically correct work environment.** Your work-space and equipment should be at the right height and distance for your hands and wrists to work with no strain. If you are working on a computer, the keyboard should be at a height that enables your wrists to rest comfortably without having to bend at an angle. It also helps to keep your elbows close to your sides as you type to reduce the strain on your forearm.
- **Good posture and wrist position.** Sit up tall, and relax your shoulders.
- **Frequent breaks.** Take a break or change activities every hour for 10 to 15 minutes to allow your wrists to rest and recover.
- **Supplement.** Omega-3 fatty acids and bromelain, as well as spices such as turmeric and ginger effectively reduce inflammation. Vitamin B6 can also reduce numbness and tingling.

You don't have to suffer from the discomforts of carpal tunnel syndrome. Acupuncture and Chinese medicine can help prevent, treat or even eliminate CTS, increasing your well-being and allowing you to live a pain-free life. If you or someone you know suffers from any of the symptoms described, we encourage you to call to discover how acupuncture and Chinese medicine, or even orthopedic surgery (when necessary), can help. **yhc**

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