

Carpal Tunnel Syndrome (CTS)

Carpal Tunnel Syndrome is an increasingly common disorder with symptoms that can be as mild as an occasional tingling and numbness in the fingers, or as severe as sharp pain, and loss of function in the hands. It is caused by swelling or inflammation in the area of the tendons which control the wrists and fingers (tendons are the fibrous cords which connect muscle to bone) and it is often brought about by repetitive strain such as typing or carrying heavy shopping. The median nerve and the blood vessels which supply and operate the hand pass through a 'tunnel' formed by the wrist bones (carpals) and a sheath of fibrous tissue at the front of the wrist. This is a very compact arrangement, and so any swelling in the area compresses the nerve at the wrist, producing pain and numbness in the fingers.

Typically, there is tingling and discomfort in the thumb, index and middle finger and the thumb side of the ring finger. Remember, though, that tingles, pains etc are *normal* with ME/CFS, and you should suspect CTS only if the problem is very persistent and troublesome. If you really suspect CTS then it is certainly a problem to take to your GP because the sooner it is treated the better is the course of recovery.

There is no proven link with ME/CFS though it does have an association with diabetes, hypothyroidism, rheumatoid arthritis and other auto immune diseases, certain drugs, chronic infections and pregnancy. It may be caused by weight gain, fluid retention, or injuries to the wrist.

Simple treatment involves the use of supporting splints to be worn at night. Diuretics may also be prescribed if fluid retention or PMS are part of the problem. It may be necessary to avoid for up to 6 weeks the repetitive action which triggered the problem, however inconvenient this may be, in order to avoid permanent damage requiring surgery. If night splints and rest don't relieve the symptoms, some doctors may recommend a steroid injection, but this will not necessarily solve the problem permanently. If no relief is obtained from the measures mentioned so far then surgery could be an option though relief takes time and success is not guaranteed. This is one of the reasons why it is important to see the doctor early for the best chance of recovery. Surgery is usually carried out as a day case and the hand has to be completely rested afterwards for four weeks. It is less successful if the syndrome has been present for some time, but even then the pain is usually considerably reduced after the operation.

In addition to these treatments, there are other strategies which may be worth trying.

Some studies have connected CTS with a deficiency of vitamin B6. This vitamin is involved in many functions, including the nervous system, the building up of collagen and elastin fibres in the muscles and tendons, and the body's fluid balance. It occurs in whole grains, fruit and vegetables, brewers yeast, cabbage, natural dairy products and eggs. Classic deficiency symptoms are irritability, depression, bloating, hair loss, muscle spasm and cracks in the corners of the mouth. Certain types of anti-depressant drugs are linked with B6 deficiency and low levels of the vitamin are also found in pregnant women, diabetics, and those taking oral contraceptives. B6 works in conjunction with the mineral zinc, which generally occurs in the natural foods where B6 is present. Vitamin B complex tablets are easily available and it is recommended to take a B complex in addition to a B6

supplement if you decide to use nutritional supplements, since the B vitamins always work together. You should consult a nutritionist if you feel you would like to take a 'therapeutic' dose (which could be up to 200mg daily as opposed to the 6 mg of B6 which might be found in a B complex supplement). Remember that it usually takes up to three months for nutritional approaches to show results.

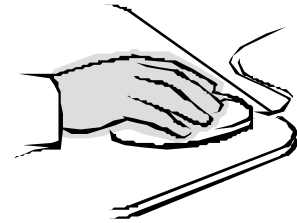
If fluid retention is a problem this could be helped by a low salt diet with plenty of green leaves and salads, and a reduction of refined carbohydrates like sugar and cakes, white bread etc. Any reduction of swelling in the forearm could relieve the pressure within the carpal tunnel. Similarly, weight loss (if overweight) could do the same.

On a regular basis, massage the wrists and hands, using circular thumb strokes, smoothing and separating the tendons in the hands. You can do this yourself if you can't persuade someone to do it for you. A massage with arnica cream will be particularly beneficial. For first aid treatment, alternate hot and cold applications with wet cloths will bring relief. At night, hang the arm out of bed.

Herbal medicine has many classic remedies in treating inflammatory conditions, and a consultation with a medical herbalist may be a good idea. Check that the practitioner is a member of the National Institute for Medical Herbalism (MNIMH). Turmeric is a natural anti-inflammatory and can be taken mixed with milk or soup, building up gradually to 1 teaspoonful per day if it suits you and shows results.

Yoga has proven benefits for the condition because it actively stretches the muscles and ligaments. Acupuncture and osteopathy also have much to offer in treating CTS.

Stretching is a necessary preparation for a work-out where any muscle group is concerned, and typing is no exception! The exercises below are strongly recommended for those who use keyboards often. Finally, when typing, remember that **the wrists should be higher than the keyboard so that the hand is not flexed backwards whilst working.**



On the next page are some helpful exercises.

Exercises which may help to avoid getting carpal tunnel syndrome or, if you do suffer from it, they may relieve the unpleasant symptoms

Firstly, useful exercise begins with the neck because that is where the median nerve emerges from the spine.

- Keeping as loose as possible, shake the shoulders and arms for a few moments, then, keeping the hands hanging down by the sides, shake the hands for several minutes.
- Rotate the hands at the wrists three times in both directions, first with the hands open then with the hands closed.
- With arms upright and elbows rested on the desk, make a falling movement with the wrist.
- Close the fists tightly and then stretch out the fingers widely, several times.

Summary

See a GP with a persistent and troublesome problem.

Treatment given might include:

- Rest
- Wrist supports
- Diuretics
- Steroid injection
- Surgery

Other things to try might be:

- Vitamin B6 and B complex supplementation
- Diet to help fluid retention (low salt)
- Massage
- Hot & cold applications
- Hand/arm exercises
- Yoga
- Osteopathy
- Acupuncture
- Herbal medicine