

Thumbs up for hand care close to home

Each time you tie your shoes, shampoo your hair, cook a meal, tap out an email or text message, or brush your teeth, you're using one of the most important parts of your body: your hands.

It's easy to take hands for granted when performing hundreds of ordinary tasks every day. Usually, every movement of hands or arms seamlessly involves the ability of joints to move, tendons to slide and muscles to contract.

But that's not all. Networks of nerves, from your fingertips to the palm of your hand, to your wrist and forearm, make it possible to experience sensations that help you stay safe ("ouch, that's hot!"), as well perform jobs (grip a hammer, carve a turkey) or provide a tender touch to loved ones.

Given the complexity of the hand, it's remarkable that injuries are not more frequent. When injuries or new conditions happen, though, a hand injury can be debilitating and require expert care.

Carpal tunnel syndrome

One of the most common hand and wrist conditions is called carpal tunnel syndrome.

Carpal tunnel syndrome occurs when tissues surrounding the tendons in the wrist swell and put

pressure on the median nerve that runs down the middle of the hand and wrist through the carpal tunnel. Normally, surrounding tissue, called the synovium, lubricates the tendons and makes it easier to move the fingers. However, if the synovium swells due to repeated use or overuse, the space within the carpal tunnel becomes narrow. Over time, it crowds the nerve. This results in numbness of the hand and, sometimes, pain.

While there is no single cause for carpal tunnel syndrome, there are several risk factors. For example:

- **Genetics.** Carpal tunnels are smaller in some people, and this trait can run in families.
- **Hand use over time.** Use of vibratory tools, such as saws or jackhammers, can intensify symptoms.
- **Hormonal changes** related to pregnancy
- **Age.** Carpal tunnel syndrome occurs more frequently with aging.
- **Certain medical conditions**, such as diabetes, rheumatoid arthritis or thyroid gland imbalance
- **Smoking.** As with many diseases and conditions, smoking causes reduced blood flow – in this case, to the median nerve in the carpal tunnel.

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Non-surgical and surgical treatment for hand, wrist and upper body conditions

"Southeastern Massachusetts is an area that experiences a significant number of hand injuries," says J. Mi Haisman, MD, a board-certified orthopedic surgeon with a Certificate of Added Qualification (CAQ) in hand surgery at Hawthorn Medical Associates. "This is due in part to certain area industries, such as manufacturing, construction and fishing, which can put people at greater risk for injury because of the nature of their work."

Fortunately, there are both non-surgical and surgical solutions for carpal tunnel syndrome, as well as other hand and upper body conditions.

"Specialized therapy can be very beneficial for injuries affecting the hands, wrists, arms and upper body," says Dr. Haisman. "Exercise programs to increase motion, dexterity or strength, splints to help prevent further injury, and simple anti-inflammatory medications are just some of the options."

If conservative measures are not effective and surgery is needed, a qualified hand surgeon can recommend a patient-tailored approach to the problem.

If you experience numbness, tingling or pain in the hand, arm or shoulder, ask your primary care provider if a referral to a certified hand therapist (CHT) or hand surgeon is indicated.

Certified hand therapists treat a wide variety of conditions affecting the hands, wrists, arms, and upper body at Saint Anne's Hospital Rehabilitation Services in Fall River and at Hawthorn Medical Associates in North Dartmouth.



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