Your Guide To Thumb Pain Relief

The Four Most Common Reasons Why Your Thumb Hurts And What Can Be Done

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Introduction

If you're having thumb pain, wondering what's going on, asking what happened, and if it can be fixed or not, this guide will tell you almost everything you need to know.

The human thumb makes up 50% of the function of the hand. Our ability to oppose our thumbs (touch the tips of each finger with the thumb) is part of what makes us uniquely human. Because our thumbs are so critical to everyday function, they often hurt and get overused.

Just pinching an object like a key or pen or a tube of lip gloss with your thumb tip creates 16 times the force at the base of the thumb.

On average, 20-25% of our patients complain of thumb pain on a given day in the office.

Thumb pain is a rampant problem.

When a patient complains about thumb pain, we look for the most common things first. Here is a brief description of each of these common reasons why thumbs hurt.
1. Thumb Arthritis

Past age 65, 75% of patients have arthritis. Sometimes it doesn't hurt, but it doesn't take much pressure or trauma to cause an arthritic thumb to start hurting.

You may or may not have lumps and bumps or deformity as a result of the arthritis - sometimes it just hurts, with a deep aching pain inside the thumb.

The pain can be anywhere along the thumb, from the base of the thumb, near the wrist, to the end knuckle of the thumb, out by the thumb nail.

Other signs of arthritis include a crunching or grinding sensation you feel when you move the thumb, or pain that gets worse in the mornings or when you pinch or twist things.

Most arthritic thumbs feel better when you hold the thumb still or take a break from strenuous activity.
Treatment for thumb arthritis

Treatment involves rest, gentle exercise to prevent stiffness, and medication. Splints can also help, but they should immobilize (stop motion in) the thumb, not just the wrist.

Over the counter rubs and creams may help with symptoms.

Ask your nurse or surgeon about Biofreeze, which is available in our office. Patients rave about this topical treatment.

When these kinds of external, non-invasive treatments stop working, an injection of cortisone (steroid) may give lasting relief for many months.

The bad news is that nothing will cure the root problem with arthritis, which is a cartilage problem. Surgery is the only method of treatment that gets rid of the grinding, unhealthy cartilage surfaces forever.
2. Trigger Thumb

If the pain is on the palm side of the thumb, at the middle knuckle, your problem might be stenosing tenosynovitis, or trigger thumb. One tell-tale sign of this thumb problem is "triggering", sticking, locking, or catching in the thumb.

It's sometimes worse in the mornings, and the thumb either locks into a bent position at the end knuckle, or stiffens up to the point where you can't bend or straighten it out all the way anymore.

Some people with chronic (long lasting) trigger thumb only have pain and stiffness, and remember a time when they had locking and "sticking" several months earlier.

Treatment for trigger thumb

Trigger thumb can be cured with a shot of cortisone in the sheath (lining) of the tendon that bends the thumb.

It's one of those thumb problems that can be cured in our office!

It doesn't require surgery very often, but the surgery is not difficult to recover from if you end up needing it. Aside
from injections, warm water soaks and anti-inflammatory medicines may help.

3. Thumb and Wrist Tendonitis

Tendons that move the thumb travel from the top side of the forearm, across the wrist, and attach to the top of the thumb.

You may have pain shooting anywhere along this area with this form of tendonitis.

This cause of thumb pain comes from inflammation along the tendons that extend the thumb into a hitchhiker's position.

It's often common in new moms who lift their babies repetitively, and may be called mommy thumb. The official name is DeQuervain’s tenosynovitis (dee-qwer-vane’s).

If you have this tendonitis, you may have pain shooting along the top of the thumb, near the wrist, and into the back side of the forearm.

One test for this is to hold the tip of your painful thumb with the fingers of that hand, and bend the wrist toward
the pinky. This puts stress and strain on the tendons and will be painful in cases of tendonitis.

**Treatment for thumb tendonitis**

Treatment with a splint and small shot of cortisone in the office is usually enough to cure the problem.

Surgery is sometimes necessary, but trying injections first is a good idea. The hardest part of the treatment is avoiding aggravating activities in the first place!

4. Carpal Tunnel Syndrome

The carpal tunnel is a tight passageway on the palm side of your wrist that carries tendons and a major nerve into your hand. Compression, or pinching of this nerve can cause thumb pain, especially at night.

Usually numbness goes along with carpal tunnel syndrome. If you don't have any numbness at all, chances are you don't have carpal tunnel syndrome.

Patients with carpal tunnel syndrome will usually have tingling or numbness in the thumb, pointer finger, middle finger, and part of the ring finger.
Treatment for Carpal Tunnel Syndrome

Treatments for carpal tunnel syndrome, like wearing a wrist brace at night or doing slow, gentle finger stretches may help the thumb pain.

Sometimes a cortisone shot is necessary as an "in between" step before considering surgery for carpal tunnel syndrome.

Carpal tunnel syndrome is the only one of these thumb problems that can result in serious permanent disability.

If you let carpal tunnel syndrome go on for too long, you’ll wind up with permanent numbness, and muscle atrophy in your hand.
Conclusion

If you have thumb pain that's not getting better, see one of our hand surgeons this week and get it diagnosed properly and taken care of.

Even if you decide to continue over-the-counter treatments and don’t need a shot or surgery, you’ll be armed with an accurate diagnosis and advice from the experts who see it every day.
Resources

Our practice website (with pictures of our surgeons, directions to the clinic, and information about other services like bone density testing and MRI):

www.ozark-ortho.com

Dr. Henley’s website for patients:

www.noelhenley.com