

Argus Orthopaedic Zone

Thumb Pain - A Serious Problem

By Thomas J. Haverbush, M.D.
Orthopaedic Surgeon

Transforming patient information into patient understanding.

I wrote an article for Argus Orthopaedic Zone about thumb pain quite a while ago. It is such a serious problem I thought it would be very good to cover it again.

In the busy family doctor's office pain in the hand and thumb in particular can get lost.

If x-rays are done at all, the x-ray report by the radiologist is often "normal".

Thumb Arthritis

It can be hard to diagnose if you are not thinking about it. Since I see a lot of hand problems in the office I am always considering it.

A very common place for arthritis to develop is at the base of the thumb where the thumb joins the wrist.

The 50% Thumb

The thumb is considered to be 50% of your hand function. So if it hurts and is not working right you really have lost a lot. Thumb pain considerably weakens your grip. It makes pinching very hard to do.

Carpal Tunnel

Carpal tunnel syndrome affects the thumb too, but it presents differently than arthritis. A major symptom of carpal tunnel is numbness in addition to pain. Thumb arthritis causes pain, but never the pins and needles feeling of carpal tunnel. Carpal tunnel can often be diagnosed by history and examination. If any doubt exists a nerve test can be done to confirm the diagnosis of carpal tunnel.

Diagnosis Made: Now What?

Treatment of thumb arthritis depends on the severity.

- Anti-inflammatory medication usually doesn't help.
- A small brace might help, but patients don't like to wear it very long.
- Physical therapy treatments can't change the arthritis.
- Injection can help, but only if done my way. It must be done with a TV x-ray to get the needle right in the joint. I do these injections a lot and it can be very effective.

Surgery

The best way I have ever found to fix thumb arthritis is this. I remove the arthritic bone and place a pad of tissue from the Michigan Tissue Bank in its place. A cast is needed for about four weeks followed by a few weeks of splinting.

This surgery is a perfect example of how I close each article. To help people return to more pain free functional lives. It is really amazing how effective it can be in someone who has basically lost use of their hand.

Don't give up if your thumb hurts. Correct diagnosis is the key. There is effective treatment.

Argus Orthopaedic Zone Archive and Website

The office website www.orthopodsurgeon.com and Your Orthopaedic Connection have a wealth of useful information about musculoskeletal problems. The website has the Archive of all previous Argus Orthopaedic Zone article. Every article from first to most recent is in the Archive, the full article!

I specialize in you.

Good health. Good life. All the best to you.

Be well.

Dr. Haverbush