



Carpal Tunnel Syndrome and the United States Supreme Court

The United States Supreme Court in early November 2001 agreed to hear a case of a woman who developed carpal tunnel syndrome and tendinitis while working on a Toyota motor manufacturing assembly line in Kentucky. The question in this case is whether a person with carpal tunnel syndrome is covered by a federal law that requires employers to make reasonable accommodation for the disabled. The woman who is the plaintiff in the case hopes for a ruling that the Americans with Disabilities Act covers her because she cannot perform certain factory work. Toyota is claiming that the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) applies only when a person is unable to engage in a broad range of activities, not specialized functions.

Does a person's inability to use of an her hand for certain tasks make her disabled? How many people will be able to seek special accommodation if the court opens the door to carpal tunnel syndrome claims?. When Congress passed the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990 it was trying to protect disabled people who have physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more of their major life activities. The patient in question who is bringing the case before this Supreme Court works as a paint inspector on an assembly line at the Toyota plant in Georgetown, Kentucky. Her work required to her to grip a block of wood with a sponge attached and wipe down cars with an oil that heightened paint flaws. She claims that it caused severe ligament and muscle problems. Toyota refused to transfer her to less strenuous work. The patient sued Toyota and Toyota argued that her impairment was not a disability under the ADA. A federal appeals court rejected Toyota's claim. The Justice Department of the United States sided with Toyota.

The patient claimed that her condition interfered with tasks such as using a hairdryer, a vacuum or a hand mixer. She also claimed that her condition excludes her from a substantial number of jobs in the labor market. Supreme Court justices seem to be divided on the issue. Some feel that handicapped people with conditions that are more extreme are the only ones that are covered by ADA. If the case is found in favor of the patient and a person with carpal tunnel syndrome is covered by protection from the Americans with Disabilities Act it will cause a flood of litigation. A ruling is expected from the Supreme Court in this case by



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July, 2002. Employers are no doubt holding their breath to see how this case turns out. Trial attorneys will be watching the outcome of this case with great interest. A positive finding in the patient's favor will, I am sure cause a flood of litigation against employers and a bonanza for trial attorneys.



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Thomas J. Haverbush, MD. P.C.

**Office Address:
315 E. Warwick Dr., Suite A
Alma, Michigan 48801
989-463-6092
Fax 989-463-8914**

**Website Address:
www.orthopodsurgeon.com**