

Trigger finger or thumb release surgery

This leaflet will help answer some of the questions you may have about trigger finger or thumb and possible surgical release. It explains the benefits, risks and alternative to the procedure.

If you have any further questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to speak to a doctor, therapist or nurse caring for you.

What is trigger finger or thumb?

Trigger finger or thumb is the term used to describe the catching of a finger or thumb as you bend and straighten it. Trigger finger or thumb is caused by a thickening around the tendon which bends your finger or thumb. It is more common in women than men and may be linked to diabetes.

What are the symptoms of trigger finger or thumb?

It may feel like your finger or thumb is clicking or it may catch and stay bent. Sometimes the only way to straighten your finger is by straightening it with your other hand. Sometimes it can be sore and painful when direct pressure is placed over the thickening in the palm of your hand.

Why should I have trigger finger or thumb released?

Treatment is needed if the triggering of your finger or thumb is causing discomfort or stopping you from being able to perform normal daily activities.

What happens during the surgery?

Surgery for trigger finger or thumb aims to remove the fibrous tissue which is affecting the movement. The surgeon will make a small cut over the area of your palm, cutting through to the thickening to release it. The surgeon will then check that the tendon and your finger move smoothly.

What are the risks?

- **Infection:** any operation can be followed by infection which can be treated with antibiotics.
- **Scar:** you will have a scar that will be somewhat firm to touch and tender for six to eight weeks.

- **Stiffness:** can occur if the hand is not used and exercised after the operation. This is usually very temporary and can be treated with exercise given by the hand therapist.
- **Nerve damage:** can occur during your surgery which results in either a painful spot in the scar or some loss of feeling in the hand. This complication is very rare but may require a further operation to correct.
- **Blood vessel injury:** damage to the blood vessel can occur during surgery as the blood vessel lies close to the thickened ligament. Damage to the vessel is very rare and can be immediately repaired.
- **Pain:** ongoing discomfort is rare, but possible, following any surgery in the hand.
- **Loss of function:** you will have a temporary loss of function and things will be a little more difficult to do following surgery while the dressings are in place. In rare cases there may be a permanent loss of function.

Are there any alternative to surgery?

A steroid injection around the tendon where it is catching can reduce swelling on the tendon and allow it to glide freely again. About 50% of people will notice a substantial improvement with one injection but others might need another. About 75% of people get complete relief from their symptoms with this treatment.

The injection takes from a few days to weeks to work. It generally causes no side-effects but occasionally thinning of the skin or loss of skin colouring can occur around the site of the injection.

Even if the steroid injection works the triggering can come back. This is less common with surgery. With both surgery and steroid injections the triggering can happen on another finger.

Will I feel pain?

You will either be given regional anaesthesia that makes the whole arm numb, local anaesthesia that will make just one finger or part of your hand numb, or general anaesthesia that will cause you to sleep. The medical team will provide you with appropriate pain medication to help reduce any pain you might have after your surgery.

It is important that you take your pain relief on a regular basis for the first few days. When taken regularly the medication is kept at a constant level in your body and will control your discomfort more effectively. Any medication given to you will be explained before you leave the hospital.

What should I look out for at home?

Dizziness and tiredness: if you have had a general anaesthetic you might feel dizzy and tired when you go home after the operation. Please rest for the remainder of the day and the following day to help you recover from the general anaesthetic. For more information, see our leaflet **Having an anaesthetic**.

The anaesthetic will take up to 24 hours to wear off. You do not need to stay in bed. Gently moving around your home will help your blood circulation and help to prevent blood clots.

Swelling: you can help to prevent or reduce swelling in your fingers by placing your arm on a couple of pillows when you are sitting or resting. You will also be given a sling. Wear this when you are not seated or resting.

Dressing: you will have a padded dressing over your wound. You may also have a partial plaster cast that will prevent you from moving your wrist. You will be told on the day of your surgery when that will be removed. Your surgeon will decide the amount of time the dressing should remain in place. Often it must remain in place for at least one week. You will most likely have stitches in your hand or wrist. Those are usually removed within 10 – 13 days. Please do not let your hand get wet. If necessary, cover it with a plastic bag tied at the wrist or a large rubber glove.

Follow up appointments

You will be given a follow-up appointment to have your dressings and stitches removed, which will either be with the plastics dressings nurses or with hand therapy. Your surgeon may recommend that you attend hand therapy for a splint or exercises. You will also have a follow-up appointment scheduled with the surgeon.

These appointments will be given to you before you leave the hospital on the day of your surgery.

If we are unable to schedule any of the appointments that day, we will send you details of the appointment by letter.

Contact us

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact the **plastic surgery** department on **020 7188 6265, Monday–Friday 9am–5pm**

Useful sources of information

Pharmacy Medicines Helpline

If you have any questions or concerns about your medicines, please speak to the staff caring for you or call our helpline.

t: 020 7188 8748 9am to 5pm, Monday to Friday

Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)

To make comments or raise concerns about the Trust's services, please contact PALS. Ask a member of staff to direct you to the PALS office or:

t: 020 7188 8801 at St Thomas'

t: 020 7188 8803 at Guy's

e: pals@gstt.nhs.uk

Language Support Services

If you need an interpreter or information about your care in a different language or format, please get in touch using the following contact details.

t: 020 7188 8815 **fax:** 020 7188 5953

NHS 111

Offers medical help and advice from fully trained advisers supported by experienced nurses and paramedics. Available over the phone 24 hours a day.

t: 111

NHS Choices

Provides online information and guidance on all aspects of health and healthcare, to help you make choices about your health.

w: www.nhs.uk

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t: 0848 143 4017

e: members@gstt.nhs.uk

w: www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk