

Dr. Andrew J. Nelson: Hand, Wrist & Elbow Specialist

Definition

Arthritis at the base of the thumb, or the Carpometacarpal (CMC) joint, occurs for many reasons. It may occur due to a traumatic injury but more often it occurs for unknown reasons.

Clinical Symptoms

You may find that you have soreness or an ache at the base of your thumb and in the fleshy part of your thumb. You may find it hard to pinch, turn a key, and open jars. Sometimes there is a prominence or bump at the base of the thumb.

Who gets Thumb Arthritis?

The most common population are females in their 40's and 50's. Each decade of aging will lend itself to more arthritic changes. Those involved in repetitive pinching can aggravate the problem. Another group of people are those who have had an injury or fracture to the base of the thumb.

How do you know I have Thumb Arthritis and not something else?

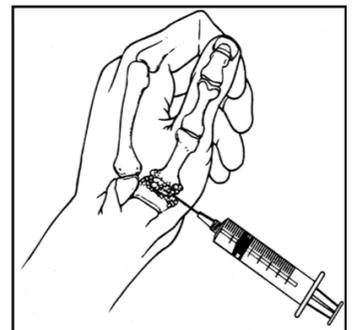
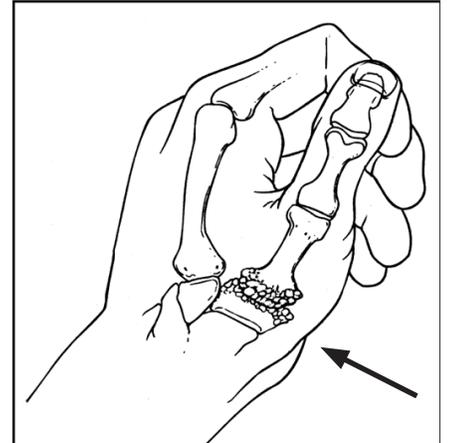
The symptoms and physical exam performed in the office confirm the problem. I will take an X-ray of your thumb as well as a thorough history and examination.

What is the treatment?

The treatment for thumb arthritis includes activity changes, arthritis medication, splinting, injections and sometimes surgery.

In the beginning of treatment an arthritis medication along with a thumb splint can be helpful. A course of hand therapy can educate you on strengthening exercises and activity modifications that can lessen your symptoms. Often the tenderness and aggravation from the arthritis warrants a steroid injection into the thumb joint. Injections can relieve a lot of tenderness by soothing inflammation in the arthritic joint.

Unfortunately, injections do not cure arthritis and they tend to wear off over time. As a last resort, surgery can be performed to relieve symptoms. When surgery is performed, the arthritic bone is removed and a soft tendon is woven into its place to cushion and support the base of the thumb.



How is the recovery from surgery?

A non-removable splint is used until the stitches are removed at 10-14 days. The day the sutures are removed, you will begin gentle therapy and you will be provided with a removable splint that will make showering much easier. At 3-4 weeks after surgery your splint use will be diminished and the strengthening phase of therapy begins and lasts 6 to 8 weeks. A majority of people get greater than 90% of their motion and an initial return of their strength by the third month, if not earlier. Pain relief is generally excellent from this surgery. Strength, however, never returns to “normal” and may take up to a year to obtain its maximum.

Will I need therapy afterward?

Yes. I have found that therapy is helpful to increase motion and strength of the hand. Therapists with special training and expertise in hand conditions will create your removable splints and guide you through your recovery.

