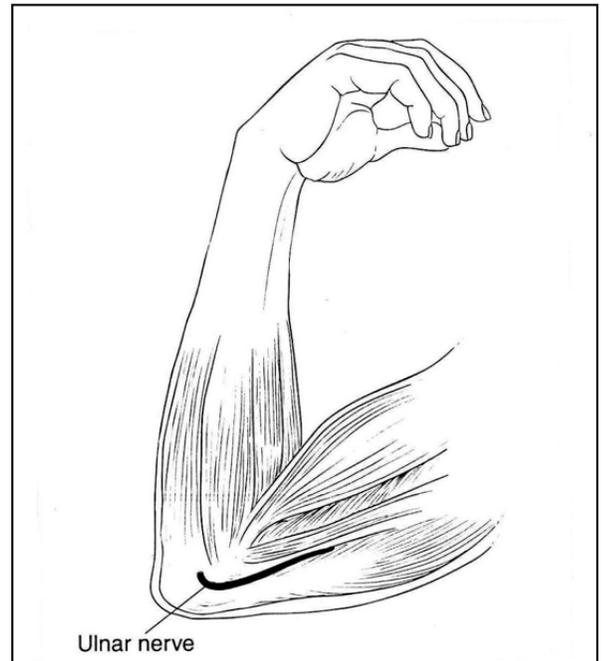


## Definition

*Cubital tunnel syndrome* is second only to Carpal Tunnel Syndrome as a compression neuropathy in the upper extremity. It is caused by pressure on the **Ulnar Nerve** at the level of the **elbow**. It is like someone stepping on, or kinking, a garden hose which results in less flow at the end of the hose. You will feel this pressure and/or kinking as numbness or tingling or “falling asleep” in your small and ring finger.

## Clinical Symptoms

The hallmark of *Cubital Tunnel Syndrome* is numbness and/or tingling in the small finger and half of the ring finger. For many, there is a sense of weakness of the hand. Occasionally, there is radiation of the feeling down the arm toward the wrist and hand. The sensation noted with *Cubital Tunnel Syndrome* is considered painful by some and/or as numbness or tingling by others. It is most often noted when the elbow is bent for a period of time such as holding a telephone, reading a book or magazine, watching TV with folded arms, or sleeping with your arms folded under your pillow. Others note the symptoms when the elbow is rested for a long time on a surface such as a table or a car window portion of the door frame. As the symptoms progress, people may feel the numbness during daytime activities that cause the elbow to be bent. There can be the sense of weakness, clumsiness and difficulty holding objects.



## Who gets Cubital Tunnel Syndrome?

Anyone can get it but it is more common in certain patient populations. Any person who is involved in repetitive activities with their hands and elbows can have *Cubital Tunnel Syndrome*. Situations that involve prolonged bending of the elbows may aggravate symptoms. Trauma or a direct blow to the inside of the elbow can lead to *Cubital Tunnel Syndrome*. Finally, *Cubital Tunnel Syndrome* has also been associated with patients that have rheumatoid arthritis, diabetes and thyroid disorders.

## How do you know I have Cubital Tunnel Syndrome and not something else?

The symptoms that people describe are common and tests performed in the office confirm the problem. I will take a thorough history and then examine your neck, arm, wrist and fingers. Since this problem is one of pressure at the level of the elbow I will try to duplicate it. If there is any question, I will order an Electrodiagnostic or Nerve Study. This study measures how fast your nerve is working. It is like putting a water flow meter on a garden hose and measuring how fast the water is getting to the end. If there is pressure on the nerve (i.e., the hose) then the test will show slowing of the nerve conduction to the fingers. Not everyone who has Cubital Tunnel Syndrome has a “positive” or abnormal test.

## What is the treatment?

Treatment begins with resting the elbow and trying to modify activities that are known to increase your symptoms.

Since the problem is too much pressure on the Ulnar Nerve from “kinking” the nerve when the elbow bends, we will use a **nighttime splint** to prevent your elbow from bending. A homemade splint may be used: take a bath towel, fold it lengthwise, and roll it over your elbow like a sleeping bag and secure it with strong tape. If this does not work a customized splint can be made for you.

Occasionally, Hand Surgeons will perform a **steroid injection** into the cubital tunnel. The level of symptoms and response to the treatment above dictates consideration of a steroid injection.

If these conservative measures do not diminish or relieve your symptoms, then surgery is indicated. The surgery involves operative release of the Ulnar Nerve to move it away from the area of pressure. The incision is located over the inside of your elbow.

## What is the recovery like?

After the operation, a bulky bandage is used for 7-10 days.

After the stitches or staples are removed you are allowed to perform light activities. At about three weeks, most people are using their arm normally. Power grip, heavy lifting and push-off activities become natural at eight to twelve weeks after surgery.

## Will I need therapy afterward?

Many patients will benefit from a course of Hand Therapy that will guide you through a program to improve your range of motion, strengthening and confidence in using your hand and arm in everyday activities.

