

Patient information factsheet

Carpal tunnel syndrome during pregnancy

Carpal tunnel syndrome is a fairly common condition that causes a tingling sensation, numbness and sometimes pain in the hand and fingers. It can sometimes occur during pregnancy. This factsheet explains why this happens and suggests some steps you can take to reduce your symptoms and some exercises that may help.

The carpal tunnel

The carpal tunnel is a narrow passage in the wrist, formed by small bones and a strong band of tissue. Passing through the carpal tunnel are tendons, blood vessels and nerves including the median nerve, which controls sensation and movement in the hand. If the median nerve is compressed or squashed in any way it causes carpal tunnel syndrome.

Carpal tunnel syndrome during pregnancy

During pregnancy, swelling in your hands is caused by a build up of fluid (oedema) in the tissues. Some of this fluid can collect in the carpal tunnel, placing pressure on the median nerve, compressing it and causing tingling and numbness in your hands and fingers.

60% (60 in every 100) of pregnant women may experience symptoms of carpal tunnel syndrome. Symptoms vary and can range from mild to very painful, and may affect one or both hands.

Symptoms are usually worse at night and first thing in the morning. They include:

- numbness and tingling in the fingers, hands and wrists
- pain or throbbing in the fingers, wrists or forearm
- swollen, hot fingers and thumb
- difficulty gripping objects and performing fiddly tasks

The following techniques may help to reduce your symptoms:

- **Rest:** Over-using your hands may increase your symptoms. Try to reduce non-essential activities where possible and rest your hands and wrists on a pillow whenever you can.
- **Ice:** Apply a small ice pack to your wrist for ten minutes or run your wrist under a cold tap. Alternating heat and cold may also help: you can use a basin of cold water and a basin of warm water, or some frozen peas/a hot water bottle wrapped in a tea towel. Alternate between warm and cool for one minute each, for five to six minutes. You can do this three to four times a day.
- **Elevation:** When resting, keep your forearm and hand elevated by propping it up with a rolled up towel or pillow. This will help to reduce the swelling.
- **Exercise:** Rest is important but it's also important to exercise your wrists and hands. The exercises over the page may help.

Carpal tunnel exercises



1) Keeping your fingers straight, bend your wrist forwards and backwards. Repeat this ten times.



2) Make a fist then straighten your fingers. Repeat this ten times.



3) Touch each finger one at a time with your thumb, making an 'O' shape.

Splints

Wrist splints (available from pharmacies) can be worn at night to stop your wrists bending. Your physiotherapist can advise you how to use them.

After your baby is born

The symptoms of carpal tunnel syndrome tend to go away within the first few weeks after your baby is born. However, if your symptoms persist or you require any further information or advice please contact your physiotherapist.

Further information or advice

Women's health physiotherapy team
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If you need a translation of this document, an interpreter or a version in large print, Braille or on audio tape, please telephone 023 8120 4688 for help.