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Arthritis of the Thumb

Arthritis is a condition that irritates or destroys a joint. Although there are several types of arthritis, the one that most often affects the joint at the base of the thumb (the basal joint) is osteoarthritis (degenerative or "wear-and-tear" arthritis).

Description

Smooth cartilage covers the ends of the bones. It enables the bones to glide easily in the joint. Without it, bones rub against each other, causing friction and damage to the bones and the joint. Osteoarthritis occurs when the cartilage begins to wear away.

The joint at the base of the thumb, near the wrist and at the fleshy part of the thumb, enables the thumb to swivel, pivot, and pinch so that you can grip things in your hand.

Arthritis of the base of the thumb is more common in women than in men, and usually occurs after 40 years of age. Prior fractures or other injuries to the joint may increase the likelihood of developing this condition.

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Symptoms

- Pain with activities that involve gripping or pinching, such as turning a key, opening a door, or snapping your fingers
- Swelling and tenderness at the base of the thumb
- An aching discomfort after prolonged use
- Loss of strength in gripping or pinching activities
- An enlarged, "out-of-joint" appearance
- Development of a bony prominence or bump over the joint
- Limited motion

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Doctor Examination

Your doctor will ask you about your symptoms, any prior injury, pain patterns, or activities that aggravate the condition.

One of the tests used during the examination involves holding the joint firmly while moving the thumb. If pain or a gritty feeling results, or if a grinding sound (crepitus) can be heard, the bones are rubbing directly against each other.

An x-ray may show deterioration of the joint as well as any bone spurs or calcium deposits that have developed.

Many people with arthritis at the base of the thumb also have symptoms of carpal tunnel syndrome, so your doctor may check for that, as well.

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Treatment

Nonsurgical Treatment

In its early stages, arthritis at the base of the thumb will respond to nonsurgical treatment.

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- Ice the joint for 5 to 15 minutes several times a day.
- Take an anti-inflammatory medication, such as aspirin or ibuprofen, to help reduce inflammation and swelling.
- Wear a supportive splint to limit the movement of your thumb, and allow the joint to rest and heal. The splint may protect both the wrist and the thumb. It may be worn overnight or intermittently during the day.

Because arthritis is a progressive, degenerative disease, the condition may worsen over time. The next phase in treatment involves injecting a steroid solution injection directly into the joint. This will usually provide relief for several months. However, these injections cannot be repeated indefinitely.

Surgical Treatment

When nonsurgical treatment is no longer effective, surgery is an option. The operation can be performed on an outpatient basis, and several different procedures can be used.

One option involves fusing the bones of the joint together. This, however, will limit movement.

Another option is to remove part of the joint and reconstruct it using either a tendon graft or an artificial substance.

You and your physician will discuss the options and select the one that is best for you.

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Rehabilitation

After surgery, you will have to wear a cast for 4 to 8 weeks, depending on which procedure is used. A rehabilitation program, often involving a physical therapist, helps you regain movement and strength in the hand. You may feel some discomfort during the initial stages of the rehabilitation program, but this will diminish over time. Full recovery from surgery takes several months. Most patients are able to resume normal activities.

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