

Carpal tunnel syndrome during pregnancy

What is the carpal tunnel?

The carpal tunnel is a narrow passage in the wrist that is formed by small bones and a strong band of tissue. Passing through the carpal tunnel are tendons, blood vessels and nerves. In this narrow space, if one of these nerves gets compressed (the median nerve) it causes carpal tunnel syndrome.

What is carpal tunnel syndrome?

Carpal tunnel syndrome is a common condition that causes a tingling sensation, numbness and sometimes pain in the wrist, hand and fingers. It occurs when the median nerve gets compressed for any reason.

What happens during pregnancy?

During pregnancy, hormone changes can cause swelling of different parts of the body, including the wrists. When this happens, fluids collect in the carpal tunnel, which can place pressure on the median nerve. When the median nerve is compressed it causes carpal tunnel syndrome.

Symptoms

The symptoms of carpal tunnel syndrome can range from mild to very painful; they may affect one or both hands. Symptoms tend to be worse first thing in the morning and at night, or with repetitive hand movement. They include:

- Pain or throbbing sensation in the fingers, wrists or forearms
- Numbness and tingling in the fingers, hands and wrists
- Swollen, hot fingers and thumb
- Difficulty gripping objects and reduced strength
- Reduced grip strength and struggling with fine movements

Prevalence

During pregnancy around 60% of pregnant women may experience carpal tunnel syndrome. It usually occurs in the third trimester (28-40 weeks), however it can occur during the first trimester (0-13 weeks).

Treatment

There are several options to try and self manage your symptoms. They include:

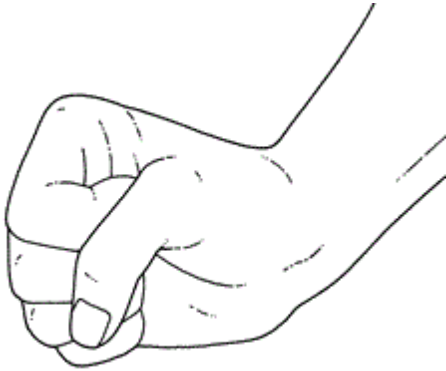
- **Rest:** Over using your hands or performing repetitive tasks with your hands may increase your symptoms. Avoid heavy lifting and non-essential activities when possible as they may increase pressure on the median nerve. At night you may try and avoid sleeping on the affected side.
- **Elevation:** When resting you may also wish to prop your affected arm(s) on a pillow or rolled up towel to reduce swelling.
- **Ice:** You may also want to try using ice to reduce swelling in the wrist. Simply apply a small ice pack wrapped in a tea towel over your wrist for 5-10 minutes. You can also try alternating between warm and cool for one minute each, for five minutes. You can do this three to four times a day as needed.

In most cases self management is effective and further treatment is only occasionally required..

Exercise

While rest is important for the wrist/hand, it is also important to exercise them safely. We recommend that you complete each exercise 3 times daily

1. Gently bend and straighten your wrist x10



2. Gently stretch out your fingers and then make a fist x10



3. Touch the tip of each finger on the tip of your thumb x5



Splinting

In the early stages of Carpal Tunnel a simple wrist splint will sometimes decrease the symptoms especially the numbness and pain occurring at night.

These splints simply keep the wrist in a neutral position (not bent back too far nor bent forward too far). When the wrist is in this position the carpal tunnel is as big as it can be - so the median nerve has as much room as possible to pass through the tunnel.

The splints worn at night prevent the hand bending whilst asleep. These are quite comfortable to sleep in and can also be worn during the day if it helps. Splints are available through the pharmacy, your GP or your Physiotherapist.

Advise on fitting wrist splint as follows:



Postnatal advice

After giving birth, symptoms of carpal tunnel syndrome may naturally disappear after a few weeks. However, if symptoms persist you may want to make an appointment to see your GP or self refer to Physiotherapy.

For additional information make an appointment with your GP or Self refer to Physiotherapy.