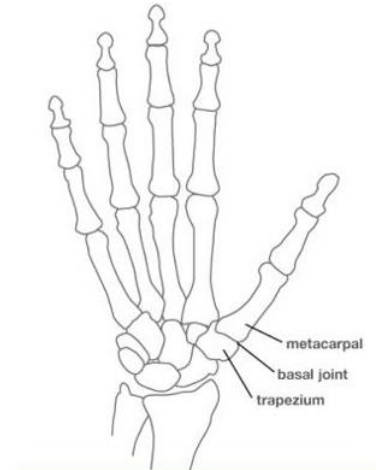


Base of Thumb Arthritis

What is it?

Osteoarthritis is wear and tear of a joint which causes a loss of cartilage and the bones of the joints to rub together. This process can occur at joint but commonly affects the base of the thumb between the metacarpal bone and the trapezium bone at the carpometacarpal joint.

Generally, base of thumb arthritis is more common in women and in people over the age of 45 (1).



Symptoms and signs of base of thumb arthritis include (2):

- Pain in the hand or wrist – this is the most common symptom and is often exacerbated by activities that involve gripping such as writing, opening jars or bottles, turning doorknobs.
- Weakness in the hand – this is often a sign of severe arthritis
- Squaring of the base of the thumb – as the disease progresses, the base of the thumb changes shape and flattens out

Causes of Basal Thumb Arthritis

Often, no identifiable cause is found but risk factors include:

- Having a family member with base of thumb arthritis
- Having a previously injured thumb
- Heavy manual work

How is it diagnosed?

Your doctor will speak and examine you thoroughly to identify the signs and symptoms of your condition. X-rays will also be needed to confirm the diagnosis.

What are the treatment options available?

Non-operative treatment options include (2):

1. Painkillers – topical anti-inflammatory gels and creams e.g. Voltarol can provide pain relief with reduced systemic effects
2. Hand Therapy & Splints – hand and wrist splints can be used to rest the hand or to support the thumb when working. Joint stability and proprioception exercises under the guidance of an occupational therapist.
3. Steroid injections – a small amount of steroid and local anaesthetic can be injected into the base of the thumb to relieve pain. This can be effective but may need to be repeated as the effects will likely wear off after 3 to 6 months.

Surgery is a final resort that is offered to people where non-operative treatments have not worked (3). Surgical options include (1):

1. Trapeziectomy – this involves removing the trapezium bone

altogether to stop the pain caused by the bones rubbing together. This is the most commonly performed procedure (1).

2. Joint fusion – the bones at the base of the thumb can be fused together to stop the bones from rubbing but this will also cause the bottom of the thumb to no longer move.
3. Joint replacement – similar to a hip replacement, the surfaces of the bone that are rubbing can be removed and replaced with artificial ones to allow for easier movement of the joint.

Frequently asked questions (FAQs)

How long will recovery from surgery take?

The recovery from surgery will vary depend on the procedure being done. Generally, after your surgery, your hand will have small wound (approximately 5 cm long) which will be covered with a gypsum plaster of Paris slab for a period of up to 6 weeks depending upon the procedure suitable per individual patient. Post operatively its essential to keep your wound dry while as it heals for the next 10

to 14 days. Sutures will be taken out at day 10-14 on attendance to hospital.

You should notice some improvement in your symptoms after several weeks which should continue up to a year. You will be referred for hand therapy to help improve the range of motion and function in your thumb.

As a whole, it may take up to 3 months to a 1 year to regain normal function in your hand again depending on the procedure undertaken.

When can I drive/return to work?

With regards to driving, you should only drive once your wound has fully healed and you can fully control the wheel and the car. This may take up to 6 to 7 weeks.

You can work once you feel your hand is ready for it, although this may vary according to your job. For desk-based jobs, you may be able to return to work after a few days but for heavy duties e.g. using machinery, lifting heavy objects, this may take up to 6 weeks before you can return to work.

References

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