



Thumb Arthritis

Arthritis of the thumb is the most common type of osteoarthritis and begins frequently with women in their 40's and 50's. The basal joint of the thumb (also called the CMC joint) is a very mobile joint. This joint rotates the thumb fully across the hand. When a joint is very mobile, it is less stable. In addition, there is a great deal of stress on this joint. When you pinch your thumb against your finger, it is not uncommon to pinch to a force of 10 pounds. By the time that force gets to the base of the thumb, it is 10 to 12 times the force of pinch, that is 100 to 120 pounds of force! Thus, over time, this is the most common joint to wear out!

This is a very painful condition and since the thumb is responsible for 40% of the use of the hand, arthritis in this joint is surprisingly disabling. With a painful thumb joint, everyday tasks such as holding a pen, picking up a pan, raking the yard or even holding a book become very difficult.



Currently, there are good surgical options for thumb arthritis but the rehabilitation after such a surgery is long (about 3 months) and it is recommended when the pain becomes impossible to live with. Below is an abstract from a research article that demonstrates how effective using a thumb splint can be.

*"Although much has been written about surgical treatment of arthritis of the first carpometacarpal joint, no literature exists on splinting as a conservative treatment. One hundred fourteen patients (130 thumbs) were retrospectively reviewed to determine the efficacy of splinting. Patients were grouped according to their stage of disease and whether they had carpometacarpal joint surgery. **Seventy-six percent of patients with stage I and II disease and 54% of patients with stage III and IV disease had improvement in their symptoms with splinting.** There was no significant difference in the degree of improvement between the 2 groups. All patients who had initial improvement in their symptoms with splinting had between 54% and 61% average improvement in symptom severity 6 months after splinting. All groups were found to be equally tolerant of the splinting protocol and no group had a significantly higher rate of activity modification. **Overall, splinting was found to be a well-tolerated and effective conservative treatment to diminish, but not completely eliminate, the symptoms of carpometacarpal joint arthritis and inflammation.** (J Hand Surg 1999; 24A:86-91)."*

A very effective way to control the pain of thumb arthritis is to use a splint, modify how you use your hand, and check with your doctor about any medicines that may help. Carefully read how to protect your arthritic joints and try to incorporate the joint protection principles in your daily life.

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