



Arthritis of the Base of the Thumb

About your condition

This handout describes the cause, symptoms, diagnosis, and treatment of arthritis of the base of the thumb.

In osteoarthritis, the cartilage layer in a joint wears out. This results in direct contact between the bones. In the hand, osteoarthritis may develop in the joint at the base of the thumb. The thumb basal joint, also known as the *carpometacarpal* (CMC) joint, is a specialized saddle-shaped joint made up of three bones. The special shape of this joint allows the thumb its wide range of motion.

Cause of Arthritis of the Base of the Thumb

This type of arthritis may be caused by simple wear and tear on the joint. Past injuries to this joint, such as fractures or severe sprains, may increase the chances of developing this form of arthritis at a younger age. Arthritis of the basal joint is most often found in women in their mid-50s or older.

Signs and Symptoms

The most common symptom of thumb basal joint arthritis is a deep aching pain at the base of the thumb. The pain is often worsened with activities that involve pinching, such as opening jars and turning door knobs or keys. As it progresses, patients may experience pain at rest and at night. They may also notice a loss of pinch and grip strength.

In severe cases, a “bump” develops at the base of the thumb. This may cause the metacarpal joint to move out of position. At this point, the space between the thumb and index finger narrows and motion becomes limited.

Questions?

Call 206-598-4263

Your questions are important. Call your doctor or health care provider if you have questions or concerns. UWMC Clinic staff are also available to help at any time.

Hand Center:
206-598-HAND (4263)

Diagnosis

Most times, the location of the pain and the appearance of the thumb joint are helpful in making a diagnosis. Applying pressure along the thumb and twisting or grinding the basal joint is also helpful in reproducing symptoms. X-rays will also confirm the diagnosis.

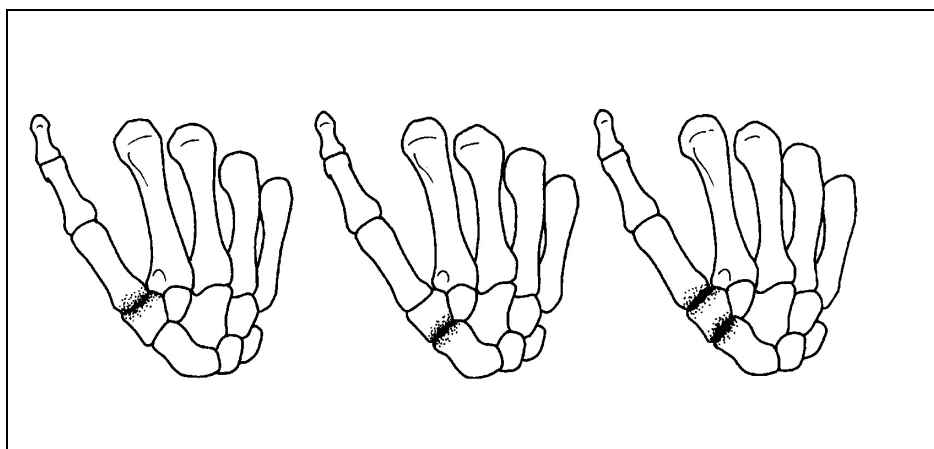
Treatments

Non-surgical Treatments

- For less severe thumb arthritis, pain medicines, topical agents, splints, and limited use of corticosteroid injections are used.
- Hand therapy may provide a variety of rigid and non-rigid splits to support the thumb.

Surgical Treatments

- Surgical techniques can reduce or eliminate pain and improve the thumb position and function.
- With advanced arthritis or for those who do not respond to surgical treatment, surgical reconstruction may be an option.



Arthritis of the base of the thumb.

Reference: *Principles of Hand Surgery and Therapy* by Thomas E. Trumble, M.D., W.B. Saunders, 2000.

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