



ARTHRITIS AT BASAL THUMB JOINT

1) Where is the basal thumb joint?

This joint is the base joint of the thumb. It is made up of a small bone at the base of the thumb, the trapezium, and the long thumb bone called the first metacarpal. Another bone in the wrist, the scaphoid, is above the trapezium and may be involved in arthritis of the thumb joint.

2) What is arthritis at the base of the thumb?

Arthritis at the base of the thumb is a very common problem. There is degeneration of the joint, or wearing of the cartilage. This cartilage acts as a cushion for the joint and with wear can result in “bone on bone” contact. This arthritis may result in minimal pain and no loss of function, to severe pain and inability to do every day activities with that hand.

3) What are the symptoms?

Pain when using the thumb for grasping or pinching activities is the usual symptom. Swelling and stiffness may be present as well.

4) What activities are affected?

This varies with each individual. Many times using the thumb for activities such as opening jars, buttoning buttons, writing or turning a key can be painful. Work or leisure activities that require pinching or grasping such as gardening, golfing, needlework and housekeeping will be affected.

5) Do these activities need to be stopped?

Most activities can be continued, though daily activities may need to be modified. The joint should be protected from further damage as much as possible. Painful activities should be avoided. Enlarging the grasp and pinch on frequently used tools, kitchen utensils, pens and pencils may help decrease stress on the joint. A hand therapist can provide information on adaptive equipment that would control the activity-related discomfort while still allowing the activity. The National Arthritis Foundation is also a good source of information on adaptive equipment.

6) Does a splint or brace help?

A splint limiting the motion of the basal joint of the thumb may decrease pain and will allow the joint to rest. Splints for the thumb may be either custom-made by a hand therapist or purchased as a pre-fabricated splint.

7) What else can be done for the pain?

Rest and avoiding painful activities are most important. Aspirin or other anti-inflammatory medicines may help. Heat or ice may also help to temporarily decrease discomfort. Some physicians may recommend a cortisone injection to help with the pain and to decrease inflammation.

8) Are there exercises that would be helpful?

Actively moving the thumb through its range of motion without pain may be helpful in maintaining joint mobility. Strengthening type exercises are discouraged because of the stress placed on the thumb joint.

9) Is surgery an option?

Yes, if rest, protection and medications do not help and the ability to grasp and pinch becomes too limiting, surgery may be necessary. What is done to restore the joint surgically depends on the condition of the joint at the time. The thumb will be placed in a cast or splint for three to six weeks and some therapy may be required when the cast is removed. Recovery can be a slow process and it may be six months before full activity can be resumed.