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Orthopedic Surgery & Sports Medicine



Carpal Tunnel Release: What to Expect at Home

Your Recovery

Carpal tunnel reduces the pressure on a nerve in the wrist. Your doctor cut a ligament that presses on the nerve. This lets the nerve pass freely through the tunnel without being squeezed.

Your hand will hurt and may feel weak with some numbness. This usually goes away in a few days, but it may take several months. Your doctor may remove the large bandage, or the doctor will tell you when and how to remove it yourself. In some cases, you may have a splint. If you have one, you will wear it for about 2 weeks.

Your doctor will take out your stitches in 1 to 2 weeks. Your hand and wrist may feel worse than they used to feel. But the pain should start to go away. It usually takes 3 to 4 months to recover and up to 1 year before hand strength returns. How much strength returns will vary.

The timing of your return to work depends on the type of surgery you had, whether the surgery was on your dominant hand (the hand you use most), and your work activities. If you had open surgery on your dominant hand and you do repeated actions at work, you may be able to go back to work in 6 to 8 weeks. Repeated motions include typing or assembly-line work. If the surgery was on the other hand and you don't do repeated actions at work, you may be able to return to work in 7 to 14 days.

If you had endoscopic surgery, you may be able to go back to work sooner than with open surgery.

This care sheet gives you a general idea about how long it will take for you to recover. But each person recovers at a different pace. Follow the steps below to get better as quickly as possible.

How can you care for yourself at home?

Activity

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- Rest when you feel tired. Getting enough sleep will help you recover.
- Try to walk each day. Start by walking a little more than you did the day before. Bit by bit, increase the amount you walk.
- For up to 2 weeks after surgery, avoid lifting things heavier than 1 to 2 pounds and using your hand. This includes doing repeated arm or hand movements, such as typing or using a computer mouse, washing windows, vacuuming, or chopping food. Do not use power tools, and avoid activities that cause vibration.
- You may do heavier tasks about 4 weeks after surgery. These include vacuuming, mowing the lawn, and gardening.
- You may shower 24 to 48 hours after surgery, if your doctor okays it. Keep your bandage dry by taping a sheet of plastic to cover it. If you have a splint, keep it dry. Your doctor will tell you if you can remove it when you shower. Be careful not to put the splint on too tight. Do not take a bath until the incision heals, or until your doctor tells you it is okay.
- You may drive when you are fully able to use your hand.

Diet

- You can eat your normal diet. If your stomach is upset, try bland, low-fat foods like plain rice, broiled chicken, toast, and yogurt.

Medicines

- Your doctor will tell you if and when you can restart your medicines. The doctor will also give you instructions about taking any new medicines.

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- If you stopped taking aspirin or some other blood thinner, your doctor will tell you when to start taking it again.
- Take pain medicines exactly as directed.
 - If the doctor gave you a prescription medicine for pain, take it as prescribed.
 - If you are not taking a prescription pain medicine, take an over-the-counter medicine such as acetaminophen (Tylenol), ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin), or naproxen (Aleve). Read and follow all instructions on the label.
 - Do not take two or more pain medicines at the same time unless the doctor told you to. Many pain medicines have acetaminophen, which is Tylenol. Too much acetaminophen (Tylenol) can be harmful.
- If you think your pain medicine is making you sick to your stomach:
 - Take your medicine after meals (unless your doctor has told you not to).
 - Ask your doctor for a different pain medicine.
- If your doctor prescribed antibiotics, take them as directed. Do not stop taking them just because you feel better. You need to take the full course of antibiotics.

Incision and splint care

- Keep your bandage dry. If it gets dirty, you may change it.
- If you have a splint, talk to your doctor about when you should wear it.

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Exercise

- You may need wrist and hand rehabilitation. This is a series of exercises you do after your surgery. This helps you get back your wrist's and hand's range of motion, strength, and grip. You will work with your doctor and physical or occupational therapist to plan this exercise program. To get the best results, you need to do the exercises correctly and as often and as long as your doctor tells you.

Ice and elevation

- Put ice or a cold pack on your wrist for 10 to 20 minutes at a time. Try to do this every 1 to 2 hours for the next 3 days (when you are awake) or until the swelling goes down. Put a thin cloth between the ice and your skin.
- Prop up the sore wrist on a pillow when you ice it or anytime you sit or lie down during the next 3 days. Try to keep it above the level of your heart. This will help reduce swelling.

Other instructions

- Avoid letting your hand hang down. This can cause swelling.

Follow-up care is a key part of your treatment and safety. Be sure to make and go to all appointments, and call your doctor if you are having problems. It's also a good idea to know your test results and keep a list of the medicines you take.

When should you call for help?

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Call **911** anytime you think you may need emergency care. For example, call if:

- You passed out (lost consciousness).

Call your doctor now or seek immediate medical care if:

- You have pain that does not get better after you take pain medicine.
- Your hand is cool or pale or changes color.
- You have a cast or splint and it feels too tight.
- You have new or worse tingling, weakness, or numbness in your hand or fingers.
- You are sick to your stomach or cannot drink fluids.
- You have loose stitches, or your incision comes open.
- You have signs of infection, such as:
 - Increased pain, swelling, warmth, or redness.
 - Red streaks leading from the incision.
 - Pus draining from the incision.
 - A fever.
- Bright red blood has soaked through the bandage over your incision.

Watch closely for any changes in your health, and be sure to contact your doctor if:

- You have a problem with your cast or splint.
- You do not get better as expected.