

## **Arthritis Of The Base Of The Thumb**

Arthritis technically means inflammation of a joint. Essentially there are two main types of arthritis, osteo-arthritis and rheumatoid arthritis (of which there are many different types). Osteo-arthritis is also known as degenerative or 'wear and tear' arthritis.

The main feature of osteo-arthritis is erosion of the cartilage, which is the smooth surface layer of the joint. When this layer of cartilage wears out, bone rubs on bone which in turn leads to the symptoms of arthritis - pain and stiffness. With further destruction of the joint the base of the thumb may become deformed and unstable resulting in an inability to grasp with the thumb.

The base of the thumb is one of the most common joints affected by osteo-arthritis in the hand. This joint acts as a universal joint and allows a wide range of movement, up and down across the palm and the ability to pinch with the other fingers.

Arthritis of the joint at the base of the thumb tends to be more common in women and usually starts after the age of 40. Previous injuries such as sprains and fractures may increase the chance of forming this type of arthritis.

Usual symptoms are pain and a reduced range of movement. Activities such as opening jars, turning door knobs, opening car doors and turning keys are often reduced.

As the disease progresses the swelling over the joint becomes quite large, begins to look out of joint and the movements are severely restricted.

### *Treatment*

Treatment of arthritis of the base of the thumb will depend on a number of factors including the age and functional requirements of the patient and the extent and severity of the disease. Early disease is usually treated with splints and medicines to reduce the swelling, and inflammation. Occasionally injections into the joint with steroids (cortisone) may also be used in an attempt to slow the progress of the disease and provide some symptomatic relieve.

In more severe cases surgery may be indicated. Several types of operations have been devised for this condition. In the recent past the joint was usually replaced using an implant made of silicon. This has fallen out of favour recently as it has been found that over time this implant slowly fatigues and breaks up resulting in further inflammation of the joint.

At the present time the main operation that is favoured is one which involves resection of the small bone at the base of the joint (trapezium) and replacing it with a rolled up piece of tendon which is obtained nearby, from the back of the hand. Most often this is performed under general anaesthetic. There is no functional deficit or noticeable weakness as a result of using the tendon in this way. The forearm, wrist and thumb are usually held in a splint for a few weeks. Driving and normal activities usually begin after six weeks.