

Carpal Tunnel Syndrome

Bodywork Treatment Proves Successful

Cathy Ulrich

It started as a vague feeling of numbness in her thumb and first two fingers, then progressed slowly to a definite tingling that woke her several nights a week. "It's not so bad on weekends when I have a chance to rest my arms, but it's now getting in the way of things I like to do at home," says Marie, who spends long hours during the work week typing at her computer keyboard. "I love to knit and cook, and I've had to curb these activities, as well."

Diagnosed with carpal tunnel syndrome, Marie displayed the classic symptoms: soreness in her forearms, pain in her hands at the end of a long day at the computer, and a feeling of tightness that had spread from hands and wrists all the

the same way many times a day over a long period of time, she has literally worn out the tissues involved in that motion. This type of injury -- called a repetitive strain injury, or RSI -- creates tiny tears in the fibers of the soft tissues of the body. While they don't immediately cause loss of function, these micro-tears set up conditions for chronic inflammation that will eventually manifest as pain, soreness, tightness, tingling, and burning.

CTS

The hand and wrist combination work together as an amazing, mechanical anatomical wonder. Imagine a set of ropes and pulleys that travel from the

I suppose leadership at one time meant muscles; but today it means getting along with people.

-Mohandas Gandhi



Working at a computer keyboard for long hours each day can bring on carpal tunnel syndrome.

way to her elbows. And recently, she'd been getting headaches.

Marie has a couple of different options for treating the problem. "My doctor tells me he can operate, but the surgery isn't always successful," she says. "He recommends I try bodywork first."

Because Marie does the same motion in

elbow through the wrist to the finger tips. The muscles reside in the forearm, moving the fingers via long tendons that run through channels in the wrist. The nerves that send and receive sensory and motor information from the brain run alongside the tendons through these same channels.

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When bending or straightening a finger, these tendons slide back and forth, just like cables. When continually working at a keyboard and using the same motion in the same position thousands of times a day -- like millions of Americans do -- the cables begin to wear. And just like threads in a rope, some of the collagen fibers will tear. This process progresses until enough fibers are torn that the body develops inflammation in the tendons and sheaths. Swelling ensues, which pinches the nerves, producing the classic symptoms of tingling, swelling, and even loss of grip strength.

The Bigger Picture

The symptoms of carpal tunnel syndrome may reveal an even bigger problem. The nerves that carry sensory and motor information to the hand arise from the spinal cord in the neck, travel under the collar bone, through the armpit and elbow, all the way to the wrist. A nerve can become entrapped at the neck, shoulder, elbow, or wrist, and an impingement in any of these places can have a cumulative effect on the tingling felt in the hands. These entrapments are usually caused by poor postural habits. The soft tissues become shortened around habitual positions of rounded shoulders and forward head from working long hours at the computer and the channels where the nerves travel through the shoulders and arms can close down. Sound familiar?

Can Bodywork Help?

A recent study conducted at The Touch Research Institute at the University of Miami School of Medicine looked at the efficacy of bodywork in treating carpal tunnel syndrome. Researchers found that after the completion of four massage sessions, the participants experienced an improvement in grip strength and a decrease in pain, anxiety, and depression. Participants also showed improvement in specific medical tests used to diagnose carpal tunnel syndrome.

This landmark study verifies what bodyworkers have observed clinically for years: Massage -- and especially deep tissue techniques, such as neuromuscular therapy, Rolfing, and Hellerwork -- can reorganize the connective tissue fibers, break up scar tissue, and reduce or eliminate the cause

of inflammation. Soft tissue work helps realign these tiny fibers of the tendons and sheaths, and the body can then heal itself -- and ease or even eliminate carpal tunnel syndrome.

Bodywork to the entire arm, shoulder, and neck will also free soft tissues where hidden tightness can contribute to the problem. Soft tissue inflammation can travel through the continuous connective tissue framework from fingertips to head and even cause headaches -- as was the case with Marie. Massage can restore these tissues to normal function.

Other Considerations

In addition to bodywork, it's important to evaluate postural habits, work station positioning, and movement patterns. When workers become so focused on their work that they forget their bodies, they tend to maintain positions that

contribute to the cause. It's important to identify several ways and several positions to accomplish the same thing. Moving the mouse from one side to the other, even during the same day, can help prevent fatigue and tissue failure. Wrist rests and keyboard trays are important, and a regular stretching routine is essential.

Finally, along with exercise and good nutrition, include bodywork as part of your regular health maintenance program. Regular massage reduces connective tissue inflammation and prevents scar tissue from forming. Movement education, such as the Alexander Technique, Feldenkrais Method, structural integration, and Trager Approach can help correct postural issues that also contribute to the problem. Bodywork is a treatment of choice to keep carpal tunnel syndrome from slowing you down.



Massage and bodywork can help mitigate the symptoms of repetitive stress injuries, like CTS.

Managing Arthritis

Exercise and Bodywork Keep Joint Pain at Bay

The word arthritis strikes fear in the hearts of older adults. It often signifies aging, pain, inactivity, and disability. However, new research shows moderate physical exercise can actually ease arthritis symptoms by decreasing pain and increasing a person's likelihood of living a normal life.

Understanding Arthritis

The most common form of arthritis--osteoarthritis, or also known as degenerative arthritis--affects more than twenty million Americans. Osteoarthritis (literally meaning "bone-joint inflammation") is caused by wear and tear on joint surfaces and most frequently involves the hips, knees, lower back, neck, and fingers. More than half of people over sixty-five have some evidence of osteoarthritis on X-rays, although it doesn't always manifest as symptoms.

Many problems arise from a sedentary lifestyle. Joints lose flexibility and muscles lose strength, feeding the cycle of pain, inactivity, and more pain.

Exercise Offers Sweet Relief

Vigorous walking, swimming, and bicycling boost the release of powerful endorphins, the body's natural painkillers. When done four to five days a week, these aerobic activities improve general cardiovascular health and aid in weight management (obesity is the single biggest risk factor for osteoarthritis).

Strengthening and stretching exercises targeted at maintaining joint flexibility and muscle strength--especially for at-risk joints--slow the progression of degenerative arthritis. Yoga classes and moderate weight lifting programs are excellent ways to improve strength and flexibility. Bodywork can also provide relief.

If arthritis is slowing you down, get serious with your exercise plan. Consult your physician; work with a professional trainer, physical therapist, yoga instructor, or bodyworker; and start a gentle, progressive exercise program. Your joints will reward you for it, and you'll free yourself from arthritic pain.



Stretching can slow degenerative arthritis.

Somatic Semantics

What Exactly is CAM?

Complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) refers to healing modalities that don't fall into conventional Western medical philosophy, including bodywork, acupuncture, herbology, homeopathy and mind/body techniques. CAM is becoming a more familiar term as approximately 125 million Americans suffering from chronic illness -- arthritis, back pain, hypertension, and depression -- look for solutions that conventional medicine can't provide.

"Complementary" modalities are used together with conventional medicine, such as utilizing aromatherapy to lessen a patient's discomfort following surgery. "Alternative" modalities are used in place of conventional medicine, such as

using herbs to treat stomach upset rather than taking pharmaceuticals. And the merging of alternative and conventional medicine is referred to as "integrative medicine," connoting the idea of combining the best of both healing philosophies.

CAM is continually gaining the respect of the Western medical system, as indicated by the nearly 100 medical schools now offering courses in alternative therapies. The University of Arizona is an exceptional model of such a school, offering the nation's only postgraduate, two-year Program in Integrative Medicine (PIM). Founded in 1994, PIM is designed to teach small groups of physicians how to integrate holistic modalities into their practices.

These doctors are committed to a fundamental redesign of medical education including such principles as:

- Appropriate use of conventional and alternative methods to facilitate the body's innate healing response;
- Consideration of all factors that influence health, including mind, spirit, and community;
- A philosophy that neither rejects conventional medicine nor accepts alternative medicine uncritically.

For more information and research about CAM, visit the nonprofit Alternative Medicine Foundation's website, www.amfoundation.org.

*You must train
your intuition
-- you must
trust the small
voice inside you
which tells you
exactly what to
say, what to
decide.*

-Ingrid Bergman

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