

Ganglion Cysts

The aim of this information sheet is to give you some understanding about ganglions. It has been divided into sections, describing your ganglion, what we know about them, and your treatment options. It is not a substitute for professional healthcare advice and should be used in conjunction with verbal information given by your GP or Physiotherapist.

What are Ganglions?

Ganglion cysts are the commonest type of swelling the hand. They are a collection of fluid in a joint or tendon lining. They are found in the wrist / hand and foot. Ganglion cysts are harmless and can safely be left alone.

What is the cause?

A ganglion cyst starts when the fluid leaks out of a joint or tendon tunnel and forms a swelling beneath the skin. The cause of the leak is generally unknown.

How common are they?

Approximately 80% of ganglions are found in the wrist. They are three times more common in women than men, between 20 - 40 years of age. Often the cause is unknown, but they may be due to trauma or underlying arthritis. Ganglions are soft, gel-like masses and their size may vary.

How is the diagnosis made?

The diagnosis is usually straightforward. The main way we diagnose your condition is through what you tell us and by examining your wrist and hand. Ganglions tend to be smooth and round. They change in size from time to time and appear at certain areas in the hand and wrist. If the diagnosis is uncertain, scans may be helpful.

What are the symptoms?

A swelling becomes noticeable. Often there are no symptoms at all. If it is not painful, treatment is not needed. However sometimes a ganglion can cause pain and limited joint movement. Some people are also concerned about the appearance of the Ganglion.

What should I do?

In the early stages it is often worth waiting to see if the Ganglion disappears on its own – this often happens. About 50 % disappear without any treatment at all. Ganglions are harmless and can safely be left alone.

What if I don't get better?

If, after six months, the ganglion has not gone down in size you may be referred for further help and possible surgery. Surgery is considered if the ganglion causes significant pain or restriction to function. However, there is a chance that ganglions will come back even after surgery.

Medication

Many people use medication to help them remain active and to cope with their pain and symptoms. It is recommended you take any medication as prescribed.

Work

It is usually recommended that you try to stay at work, or get back to work as soon as possible. You do not need to be pain or symptom free to return to work. Research has shown the longer you are off work the less likely it is that you return.

About the surgery

Ganglion cyst at the back of the wrist: Typically occurs in young adults and often disappears without treatment. Draining it can reduce the swelling but it often returns. The risk of it coming back even after surgery is around 10%. Problems after surgery include persistent pain, loss of wrist movement, and painful trapping of nerve branches in the scar.

Ganglion cyst at the front of the wrist: May occur in young adults, but also seen in older people with arthritis. Draining it may be useful, but the cyst is often close to the artery at the wrist (where you can feel the pulse) so this may be dangerous. The risk of it coming back again after surgery is around 30%- 40%. Problems after surgery include persistent pain, loss of wrist movement and trapping of nerve branches in the scar. For these reasons, many surgeons advise against operation for these cysts.

Ganglion cyst at the base of the finger (Flexor tendon sheath): Usually occurs in young adults. It feels like a dried pea at the base of the finger. There may be pain when gripping. The risk of it coming back again after surgery is small. However, persistent pain, loss of finger movement and painful trapping of nerve branches in the scar can be a problem after an operation.

Finger ganglion cyst (sometimes called mucoid cyst): Usually occurs in middle-aged or older people and is associated with wearing out of the end joint of a finger. Pressure from the cyst may cause a furrow in the fingernail. Occasionally the cyst fluid leaks through the thin overlying skin from time to time. The risk of it coming back again after surgery is around 10%. Problems after surgery include infection, stiffness and pain from the worn out joint.

Try to stay positive. There is a lot you can do to help yourself. Most symptoms do settle with time.

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