

De Quervain's Tenosynovitis

My Thumb and Wrist Hurt

What Is De Quervain's Tenosynovitis?

De Quervain's tenosynovitis is an irritation and swelling of the tendons on the thumb side of the wrist — specifically the abductor pollicis longus and extensor pollicis brevis tendons and the sheath surrounding them. These two tendons travel through a tight fibrous tunnel at the base of the thumb, and when the sheath becomes inflamed, every movement of the thumb or wrist causes pain. It is significantly more common in women than men and is one of the most frequent causes of new wrist pain in new mothers (due to repetitive lifting of an infant).

What Does It Feel Like?

- Pain and tenderness directly over the bony prominence at the thumb side of the wrist (radial styloid)
- Pain with pinching, gripping, or making a fist
- Pain when moving the thumb away from the palm or into a hitchhiker position
- Swelling over the outer wrist, just above the thumb
- A positive Finkelstein's test — tucking the thumb into the fist and tilting the wrist toward the little finger reproduces sharp pain
- Aching that extends up the forearm

What Causes It?

- Repetitive pinching or gripping — new parents lifting infants ("new mom's wrist"), golfers, gardeners
- Smartphone use — repetitive scrolling and texting with the thumb
- Rapid increase in repetitive hand activity
- Pregnancy and postpartum hormonal changes that affect tendon sheaths

How Is It Treated?

- Thumb spica splint — immobilizes the thumb and wrist to allow the sheath to settle

- Activity modification — reducing the aggravating pinch and gripping motions
- Physical therapy — stretching, ultrasound, tendon gliding exercises, and progressive strengthening
- Corticosteroid injection — very effective for reducing sheath inflammation
- Surgery (rare) — release of the first dorsal compartment when conservative treatment fails

When Should I Be Concerned?

- Failure to improve after 6–8 weeks of splinting and activity modification
- Increasing pain and weakness despite treatment

The Good News

De Quervain's tenosynovitis responds very well to conservative treatment. A combination of splinting, activity modification, and physical therapy resolves symptoms in the majority of patients. For those who need it, a single corticosteroid injection has a very high success rate. Most people return to full use of the thumb and wrist without surgery.

With proper conservative treatment, most patients with De Quervain's recover fully without surgery within 4 to 8 weeks.

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