

My Hands Are Numb and Tingly

Understanding Hand Numbness and Tingling

Why Are My Hands Numb and Tingly?

Numbness and tingling in the hands — medically called paresthesia — is one of the most common complaints seen in physical therapy. While it often creates anxiety about serious conditions, the vast majority of cases have a straightforward mechanical cause that responds well to targeted treatment. The key to successful treatment is identifying precisely which nerve is affected and where it is being compressed or irritated.

Common Causes — Where Is the Problem?

The wrist — Carpal Tunnel Syndrome (most common):

- Numbness in the thumb, index, middle, and part of the ring finger
- NOT the little finger — this is an important distinguishing feature
- Typically worse at night, driving, or when holding a phone or book
- Caused by median nerve compression in the carpal tunnel

The elbow — Cubital Tunnel Syndrome:

- Numbness in the ring and little finger (ulnar nerve)
- Worse when the elbow is bent — leaning on the elbow, sleeping, driving
- The inner elbow may ache

The neck — Cervical Radiculopathy:

- A compressed nerve root in the neck can refer numbness or tingling down the entire arm and into the hand
- Neck pain or stiffness may accompany
- Symptoms may follow a specific distribution depending on which nerve root is affected (C6, C7, C8)

Thoracic Outlet Syndrome:

- Compression of nerves and/or blood vessels between the collarbone and first rib
- Numbness affecting the entire hand or primarily the little and ring fingers
- Often worse with overhead arm positions or carrying bags

Systemic causes:

- Diabetes — peripheral neuropathy causing a diffuse "glove" pattern of numbness, both hands
- Vitamin B12 deficiency, thyroid disorders

How Is This Figured Out?

- A thorough clinical assessment with nerve tension testing, provocation tests, and sensory mapping
- Nerve conduction studies (NCS) and electromyography (EMG) — electrodiagnostic testing — confirm nerve involvement
- Imaging (MRI or X-ray) if cervical spine involvement is suspected

When Should I Be Concerned?

- Constant numbness that does not vary — particularly concerning for nerve damage
- Progressive weakness developing alongside numbness
- Visible muscle wasting in the hand
- Loss of coordination or fine motor skills

The Good News

Hand numbness and tingling — while alarming — is highly treatable in the vast majority of cases once the source is identified. Physical therapy addresses nerve compression at every level: the wrist, elbow, shoulder, and neck. Most patients experience significant relief within weeks of beginning a targeted nerve treatment program.

Hand numbness and tingling is highly treatable — once the exact source is identified, most patients experience significant relief with a targeted PT program.

This information is for general educational purposes only and is not a substitute for a professional evaluation. Call us today — we have immediate openings with no waitlist.

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