

DeQuervain's Syndrome

Patient Information Leaflet

MSK Musculoskeletal Physiotherapy Service



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What is DeQuervain's syndrome?

DeQuervain's syndrome, sometimes called DeQuervain's tenosynovitis, is a common cause of pain on the thumb side of the wrist.

It is a condition that affects the tendon sheath (outer layer) that surrounds two of the tendons that move the thumb, where the sheath can become thicker and sometimes inflamed. This can make thumb movements, and some wrist movements painful.

Pain doesn't always mean damage. It often means the tissues, in this case the tendons, are finding it difficult to cope with the amount of load being placed on them at that time.

DeQuervain's syndrome is not harmful, but can be painful and frustrating. However, with time, the right advice and appropriate management, most people improve and return to their usual activities.

Common symptoms

- pain on the thumb side of the wrist, near the base of the thumb which may spread up the arm and be painful to press

- pain when lifting the thumb e.g. using scissors, or pinching and gripping things
- pain when moving the wrist sideways e.g. picking up a baby or using a hammer
- swelling at the painful area
- a clicking or snapping noise or feeling when moving the thumb or wrist

Why does it happen?

It is thought to be mainly caused by overuse, such as repeating the same movements or taking part in certain sports. It is also common in people caring for young babies. However, it can develop without an obvious cause.

Factors that make developing DeQuervain's syndrome more likely include:

- being female
- aged 40 to 60 years
- being pregnant, breastfeeding or looking after a baby
- jobs involving repetitive wrist or thumb movement such as those of an electrician or typist
- hobbies involving repetitive wrist or thumb movements such as knitting or golf

How is DeQuervain's syndrome diagnosed?

DeQuervain's syndrome will usually be diagnosed based on the symptoms you report. Healthcare professionals will consider:

- your symptoms
- where you feel the pain
- how your symptoms change with movement or activities
- your medical history

A physical assessment may be helpful to gather more information should the cause of symptoms be unclear or fail to improve when following the initial advice provided.

In many cases, scans and X-rays are not needed.

Scans and X-rays can show what your joints, muscles, tendons, ligaments and nerves look like, but they cannot tell us:

- how much pain you are in
- exactly where the pain is coming from
- how well you can move or function

Many results show normal changes that happen as we get older. These changes are often seen in people with and without pain.

However, scans or X-rays can be helpful in some less common situations, such as:

- when a serious injury, like a broken bone, is suspected
- when a serious condition such as an infection or cancer needs to be ruled out
- when your symptoms suggest you may need a different type of treatment, such as surgery

Your healthcare professional will be able to advise you if a scan or X-ray is needed.

Self-help

There are lots of simple ways you can help yourself to manage your wrist or thumb pain.

Activity Modification

For a short time, you may need to do less of the activities that cause you pain. If this does not help, you may need to stop these activities for a short time. You can then gradually start doing them again as you feel able.

Pain Relief

Over-the-counter anti-inflammatories such as ibuprofen are usually recommended. Check with your pharmacist if you are unsure about whether you can take them.

Ice can be very helpful; try an ice pack or a bag of frozen vegetables wrapped in a towel. Apply for up to 20 minutes at a time. You can repeat this every 2 to 3 hours if needed.

Do not place ice directly on your skin, as this may cause burns or skin damage.

Support

Using a wrist or thumb splint can help if you wear it during the day when you are doing activities which may otherwise cause you pain. However, it is **not recommended to wear it all the time**.

Exercise

It is safe and important to exercise your wrist and thumb.

First, try to settle the early painful stage with pain relief and by changing activities that make your pain worse. Once the pain has settled, you can start movement exercises. As you feel able, you can then move on to resistance and strengthening exercises.

Exercises

It is normal to experience mild discomfort during and for a short while after these exercises. However, the exercises should not cause a significant increase in your symptoms.

If your symptoms worsen, try gentler or smaller movements with fewer repetitions, and build up slowly.

Do not move to the next stage of exercises until you can complete the earlier stage comfortably.

aim to repeat each exercise **up to 10 times**

1 to 2 times a day as able

(unless advised otherwise)

Exercises to improve movement

1. Wrist Deviation

Place both palms together and clasp your fingers.

Move your wrist up and down (towards you and away from you).

Watch the video here:

<https://youtu.be/1poMIBncmtQ>



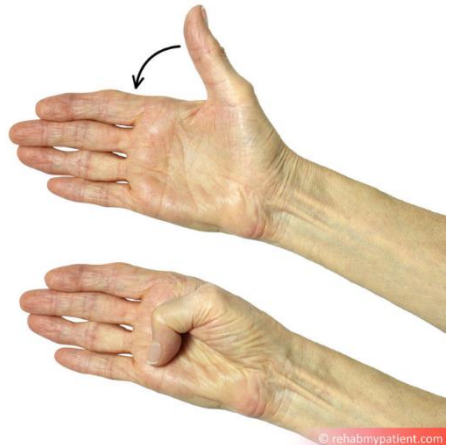
2. Thumb Flexion

Fingers straight. Lift your thumb up.

Bend your thumb downwards towards your palm and return to the start position.

Watch the video here:

<https://youtu.be/voAQ8RnoJLQ>



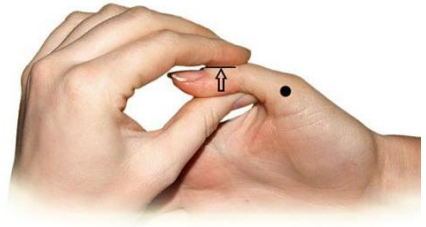
Level 1

Exercises to improve strength

1. Isometric Extension

Hold your affected thumb with the other hand. Try to move your thumb upwards, resisting the movement.

Hold for 5 seconds and slowly relax.



Watch the video here:

<https://youtu.be/JINiPRTe4Rw>

2. Isometric Abduction

Place your other index finger against the affected thumb.

Using the finger to resist the movement, try and push your thumb away outwards (away from the midline of your hand).



Hold for 5 seconds and slowly relax.

Watch the video here: https://youtu.be/3_8SIqWZ8w4

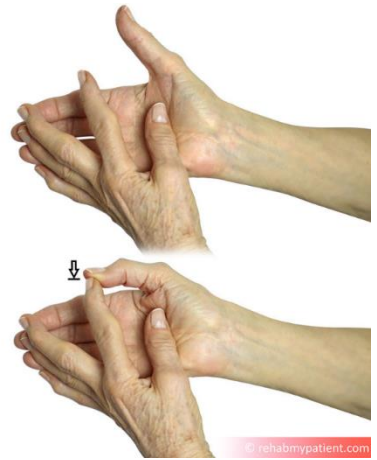
3. Isometric Flexion

Place your affected thumb close to the tip of your other index finger.

Using the finger to resist the movement, try and push your thumb inwards (towards the midline of your hand).

Hold for 5 seconds and slowly relax.

Watch the video here: <https://youtu.be/XrbaDQj3HTQ>



Level 2

Exercises to improve strength

Do **not** move to this next stage of exercises until you can complete the previous stage comfortably.

1. Radial and Ulnar Deviation with Weight

Hold a $\frac{1}{2}$ to 1 kg weight i.e. a small bottle of water or dumbbell.

With your arm outstretched in front of you, move your wrist up and down.



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Watch the video here: <https://youtu.be/saJbuK47z-4>

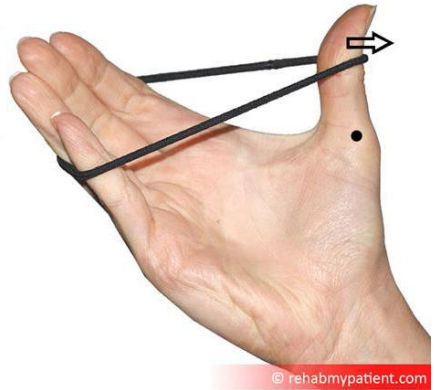
2. Thumb Extension with Band

Place an elastic band (or hair tie) around your fingers and thumb.

Move your thumb away from your fingers against the resistance of the band.

Slowly relax.

Watch the video here: <https://youtu.be/0me9b2Kjkbc>



3. Abduction with Band

Wrap an elastic band (or hair tie) around your fingers and thumb.

Pull your fingers and thumb apart from each other, against the resistance of the band.

Slowly relax.

Watch the video here: <https://youtu.be/5kp45nPJxa8>



How long does it take to improve?

Recovery time is variable from person to person. Most people will notice some improvements within 6 to 12 weeks. However, full recovery can take several months, especially if you have had pain for a long time.

Flare-ups of pain can happen during recovery and are a normal part of this process.

Although the progress can be slow, perseverance is key and often things will improve.

When should I seek further help?

You may wish to seek further advice from a physiotherapist if:

- your pain is not improving
- your pain is getting worse
- your pain is affecting your ability to work, perform daily activities or chores, or enjoy your hobbies
- you keep getting repeated episodes of wrist or thumb pain

You should contact your GP or NHS 111 if you:

- have had an injury or trauma to the area

- have spreading redness, skin that feels hot to the touch, visible pus, or you develop a fever
- have numbness, a complete loss of feeling, or a persistent "pins and needles" tingling sensation in your thumb, wrist, or index finger
- have an inability to move your thumb or fingers at all, or a sudden, dramatic drop in grip strength that prevents you from holding basic objects
- notice the hand or thumb turning pale, blue, or feeling icy cold compared to your other hand

Remember

Pain does not necessarily mean damage.

DeQuervain's syndrome is painful but is not harmful.

Keeping your thumb and wrist moving is important for recovery.

Recovery can take time, but most people improve with self-management and appropriate exercise.

Flare-ups can happen and do not necessarily mean that you have caused harm.

Acknowledgements



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If you need help to understand this leaflet or would like it in a different language or format such as large print, Braille or audio, please ask a member of staff.



MSK Physiotherapy Service

Find out more about the MSK Physiotherapy Service and what we offer

www.leicspart.nhs.uk/service/musculoskeletal-msk-therapy-physiotherapy/



Further Resources

Access our other MSK Physiotherapy resources www.leicspart.nhs.uk/msk-physiotherapy-resources-getting-started/

Date implemented: September 2026

Last review: September 2026

Review date: September 2028

Leaflet Reference: CHS MSK 33 DeQuervain's Syndrome Edition 1