

Patient Information Sheet

Trigger Finger or Thumb

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What is triggering?

Triggering occurs when the tendon develops a nodule or swelling of its lining.

In the fingers and thumb the flexor tendons pass through a narrow lubricated canal. As the swollen segment of tendon squeezes through the narrow opening of the canal, there is sudden clicking of the digit. The repeated minor trauma associated with this leads to further inflammation and swelling. Sometimes the finger becomes stuck and is difficult to straighten or bend. In the majority of patients, triggering appears to develop spontaneously, but is commoner in individuals with diabetes or rheumatoid arthritis.

Diagnosis

The diagnosis is made on the basis of the history of triggering, reproducing the clicking and often there is tenderness and a palpable nodule at the base of the finger or thumb on the palmar side.

Treatment

The swelling around the tendon can sometimes be alleviated by injecting a tiny amount of steroid. If this fails to resolve the problem or if the triggering is very pronounced, surgery may be appropriate. This is carried out on a daycase basis. The opening of the canal through which the flexor tendons glide is released. In patients with rheumatoid arthritis, the inflamed synovial lining of the tendons is removed and it is sometimes necessary to remove a part of one of the flexor tendons to the finger.

After surgery

A long-acting anaesthetic is used, which means that the numbness lasts for several hours and simple pain killers are all that are necessary afterwards. You must avoid aspirin as this may cause bleeding. The stitches are left in for 2-3 weeks. The hand must be kept dry during the first week. You can bathe by placing a plastic bag over the hand. The dressings can be reduced after about a week. It is very important you keep your hand elevated as much as possible, at least during the first week. During the daytime you can wear a sling and at night the hand can be rested on a couple of pillows. This helps reduce the swelling and postoperative discomfort. It is important that you begin moving the digits immediately following surgery, in particular straightening the finger, to regain a full range of motion,

Possible complications

- As after any surgery, infection can occur, but is rare.
- If you were unable to straighten the finger completely before surgery, the joint may have become fixed and the deformity may persist
- Sympathetic dystrophy, which presents as pain, swelling, stiffness and discolouration, is uncommon and is treated by intensive hand therapy.

