

Carpal Tunnel Syndrome¹

Prepared by Jill Shelley and Michael Dennis²

Bending, turning and repeated movement of your hands can lead to soreness and stiffness. You brush it off as soreness that goes with a day of hard work. Is that all that is wrong? You may have what is known as carpal tunnel syndrome (CTS).

Carpal Tunnel Syndrome is becoming more widely reported among many occupations, from farmers to newspaper people. CTS is the compression and entrapment of the median nerve where it passes through the wrist into the hand. When irritated, tendons swell and press against the nearby median nerve. The pressure causes tingling, numbness or severe pain in the wrist, and hand, primarily in the thumb, index and middle finger. The pain is often experienced at night. The pressure also results in a lack of strength in the hand and an inability to make a fist, hold objects or perform other manual tasks. If the pressure continues it can damage the nerve, causing loss of sensation and even decreased strength.

The meat packing industry experiences a high number of CTS cases because workers make up to 10,000 repetitive motions per day in assembly line processes, such as deboning meats, with no variation in motion. More than half of all U.S. workers risk developing CTS. Anyone whose job demands a lot of repetitive wrist, hand, and arm motion, which need not always be forceful or strenuous, might be a potential victim of CTS. Lauri Kizler, registered occupational therapist with Saint Mary Hospital in Manhattan, says there are a variety of ways to treat carpal tunnel syndrome.

"The treatment methods include rest, immobilization of the wrist, gentle exercises, and minor surgery. Prevention includes appropriate exercises, proper positioning of the wrist and hand, avoiding repetitive movements, and avoiding use of excessive force using the hands."

Use of power tools such as electric screwdrivers reduces the risk of developing CTS by reducing the number of repetitive motions. Kizler says you should also try to use tools that fit the hand, such as those with curved handles. "These types of tools are now widely available and promote optimum positioning."

COMMON CAUSES OF CARPAL TUNNEL SYNDROME AMONG FARMERS

1. Prolonged use of vibrating power tools (e.g. right angle grinders).
2. Frequent use of tools that require gripping with the hands (pitchfork, shovels, post tamper, etc.).
3. Gripping the steering wheel of machinery for long periods of time.
4. Carrying heavy buckets of materials.

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