Carpal tunnel syndrome in pregnancy

Information for patients
MSK Outpatients - Women's Health (Therapy)
What is carpal tunnel syndrome in pregnancy?
Carpal tunnel syndrome (CTS) is a common disorder of the wrist and hand during pregnancy. It can affect up to 60% of pregnant women. CTS is the result of pressure on the median nerve at the wrist.

What causes carpal tunnel syndrome in pregnancy?
There is 30-50% more fluid inside your body during pregnancy. CTS in pregnancy may occur when the median nerve in your wrist is compressed by this extra fluid.
What are the symptoms of carpal tunnel syndrome?

The symptoms may include any of the following:

- Pain and discomfort in the palm of the hand, thumb and fingers.
- Swelling in the hand, thumb and fingers.
- Weakness of some muscles in the fingers and/or thumb can occur in some cases. This may cause poor grip.
- Loss of sensation (numbness) in the fingers and hand, which may cause poor awareness of hot and cold temperatures.
- Pins and needles, burning or tingling sensations in the hand, thumb and fingers.
- Stiffness and cramping in the hands first thing in the morning.

Symptoms can vary from person to person, and be mild or severe, affecting one hand or both hands. Typically, symptoms are worse at night and may wake you up. CTS will not harm your baby.

What increases the risk of getting carpal tunnel syndrome in pregnancy?

The following factors may increase the risk of you getting CTS in pregnancy:

- Diabetes in pregnancy
- Obesity
- Repetitive wrist movements
- Keeping your hands down by your sides for a long time
- Putting weight through your hands e.g. on your hands and knees on the floor
- Injury to the wrist
- Rheumatoid arthritis
What treatments are available for carpal tunnel syndrome?

There are a few things that you can do to try to lessen the symptoms of CTS while you are pregnant:

- Keep the wrists straight at night while you are in bed, and try not to lie on your hands.
- First thing in the morning, hold your hands in the air above your head and open and close your fingers a few times to reduce any overnight swelling. You can repeat this exercise a few times throughout the day.
- Place your hands under cold water for 30 seconds, and then in warm water for 30 seconds. Repeat this 10 times to improve the blood circulation in your hands. Be careful not to burn your hands if you have poor sensation in the hands and fingers.
- Ice wrapped in a damp towel and placed over your hand and fingers for 5-10 minutes may help. Repeat this 3-4 times a day. If you have poor sensation in your hands and fingers be careful that you do not get an ice burn.
- When you are sitting, place cushions under your arm and hands to keep your arms at the same level as your heart. This will help the blood circulation.
- Some women find a wrist splint helps to reduce the symptoms of CTS, keeping the wrist straight at night while you sleep.
Advice about carpal tunnel splints

What does the splint do?
The splint is designed to reduce symptoms of CTS for example numbness, tingling, pain and pins and needles.

How to put on the splint?
1) You may find it helpful to rest your arm against your body or on a table
2) Make sure the cut out is on the thumb side
3) The metal bar will have been altered by your physiotherapist to a straight position and this should always be on the palm side.
4) Bring the two edges of the splint together and fasten the straps but not too tightly as this can cause swelling. There should not be any gaps between the splint edges.
5) You should be able to see all your knuckles, the splint should be below the crease on the palm on the side of your little finger.

When should the splint be worn?
You should wear the splint overnight while sleeping. It can also be worn during rest periods in the day if your symptoms are particularly bad. It is not suitable for wearing during activity.

How effective is the treatment?
You should be able to control your symptoms and prevent further pain and discomfort during your pregnancy.
What else can I do to help my Carpal Tunnel Syndrome?

- You need to take care when touching hot and cold objects to ensure that you do not burn yourself because of the possible poor sensation in your hands.
- Muscle weakness and loss of sensation in your hands may cause you to drop objects, so take care hold objects with a good grip before lifting them.
- Pain killers and corticosteroid injections may help. Please ask your midwife or GP before taking any medication.
- Avoid repetitive twisting movements of the wrist.
- Avoid hanging your arms down by your side for long periods of time.
- Avoid putting your weight on your hands for example, kneeling on the floor with your weight through your arms.
- You should stop doing any activity that causes the pain.
- Try not to grip too tightly, for example on the car steering wheel, mobile phones and carrying bags. Do try to relax your grip frequently and change activities often.
What will happen after the delivery of my baby?

CTS usually recovers soon after the delivery of your baby. In some women, the symptoms can last for over a year. Visit your doctor if you are concerned about your symptoms.

It is unlikely that CTS in pregnancy requires surgery.

Who should I contact if I have any concerns?

You can contact the physiotherapist if you have any concerns or questions:

- **0114 271 3090**

Where can I find more information?

The following websites will give useful information:

- [http://pogp.csp.org.uk](http://pogp.csp.org.uk)
- [www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)
- [www.patient.co.uk](http://www.patient.co.uk)