

**T**he carpal tunnel is a narrow passage in the wrist, formed by small bones and a strong band of connective tissue. Passing through the carpal tunnel are tendons, blood vessels and nerves including the median nerve, which controls sensation and movement in the hand. If the median nerve is compressed or squashed in any way it causes carpal tunnel syndrome.

### WHAT IS PREGNANCY-RELATED CARPAL TUNNEL SYNDROME?

During pregnancy, increased fluid and relaxation of the ligaments in the hand and wrist can cause pressure on and compress the nerves and blood vessels of the carpal tunnel. Some of this fluid can place pressure on the median nerve, compressing it and causing tingling and numbness in your hands and fingers. Sixty percent (60 in every 100) of pregnant women may experience symptoms of carpal tunnel syndrome. Symptoms vary and can range from mild to very painful, and may affect one or both hands.

Symptoms are usually worse at night and first thing in the morning. They include:

- numbness and tingling in the fingers, hands and wrists;
- pain or throbbing in the fingers, wrists or forearm;
- swollen, hot fingers and thumb;
- disturbed sleep;
- difficulty gripping objects and performing fiddly tasks like shampooing your hair or doing up buttons;
- holding your toothbrush or even your baby may be painful; and
- in some cases, weakness results in clumsiness of your hands, like difficulty gripping or dropping items.

### WHEN WILL THE PROBLEM GO AWAY?

In most cases, the symptoms should begin to ease soon after the birth of your baby and will resolve over time in a matter of weeks.



# Pregnancy Carpal Tunnel Syndrome

### HOW DO I MANAGE MY SYMPTOMS?

Conservative management for up to 3 months is recommended for pregnancy-related carpal tunnel syndrome. Those with symptoms persisting beyond this should consult their doctor or physiotherapist.

- 1. Wrist splints.** Wearing wrist splints (available from the chemist or your physical therapist) can help relieve pain and keep your wrist/s from bending forwards.
  - Try wearing splints as much as possible, including overnight, for the best results.
- 2. Modify your activities.** Changing the way in which you perform day-to-day tasks, to reduce the bending of the wrist and pressure in the carpal tunnel, can improve and assist in the management of symptoms. Aim to keep a relaxed and neutral wrist.
  - Minimise sleeping on the affected side (if your symptoms are only in one hand) and raise the arm on a pillow if possible.
  - Keep your wrist from bending or 'flopping' forwards when doing everyday tasks. Wearing a wrist splint can help with this.
  - Modify heavy lifting or activities that make the symptoms worse, eg. repetitive tasks such as writing, typing, using a mouse, carrying grocery bags and household chores.
  - Ask for help with food preparation or tasks that provoke symptoms.
  - Take frequent breaks from repetitive activities and where necessary use ergonomic devices such as an adapted keyboard, mouse, mousepad, etc.
- 3. Exercise and movements that may help.** Exercising and stretching the wrists has been shown to further assist with symptoms. Your physical therapist

can help give you exercises to perform at home. The exercises can reduce the stiffness in your finger joints and help reduce swelling.

- 4. Manage swelling of the hand and wrist** It can also be beneficial to use strategies to reduce or manage swelling in the hand and wrist.

- Using cold packs on the inner part of the wrist or placing your hands in cold water for 30 seconds to 1–2 minutes may help reduce swelling. Stop if your symptoms worsen.
- Try resting with your hands above your heart (elevated) for a few minutes, several times a day.

- 5. Pain relief medication.** As some pain medications may not be safe to take during pregnancy, always consult your doctor, midwife or pharmacist before taking medication for your pain.

### HOW DO I MANAGE UNTIL MY PAIN SUBSIDES AFTER BIRTH?

It may take time for your symptoms to subside, you may need to continue to change the way you do everyday activities (including baby care) after delivery as well. Some helpful tips are;

- Continue wearing splints if you have/ need them.
- Avoid straining your arms and wrists during breastfeeding by placing a pillow under your baby and support your baby's head with your forearm.
- Speak with your midwife, child health nurse or lactation consultant about alternative feeding positions if necessary (eg. side-lying).
- Try carrying and picking up your baby in different ways to avoid wrist strain, regularly alternating your baby handling strategies can reduce the load on the wrist and hand.
- Use a pram or baby carrier where possible.

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