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Basal Thumb Joint Arthritis

Arthritis is degeneration of a joint, usually due to loss of or degeneration of the smooth layer of articular (joint) cartilage on the ends of the bones. Arthritis of the base of the thumb is known as basal thumb joint arthritis, or thumb CMC (carpometacarpal) arthritis.



Symptoms:

Pain is the usual feature of basal thumb arthritis. Pain is typically dull and achy, but can be sharp and progressive, as the arthritis progresses. Stiffness, weakness with pinch and grip, and deformity at the base of thumb can also develop. Basal thumb arthritis is more common in women, and more common with aging.



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Cause:

The cause of basal thumb arthritis, as with any arthritic joint, is usually wear-and-tear, or simply degeneration of the joint as we get older. Overuse can be a factor, particularly in men who grip and grasp a lot, and women who perform repetitive activities such as knitting. Arthritis can also follow trauma, such as a fracture or dislocation of the basal thumb joint. Inflammatory conditions, such as gout and rheumatoid arthritis can affect the basal thumb joint

Diagnosis:

A careful history and physical examination will usually diagnose basal thumb arthritis. Plain x-rays are diagnostic. Advanced imaging, such as CT and MRI are not commonly needed. The arthritis can affect the dominant hand, non-dominant hand, or often both.

Treatment:

Basal thumb arthritis is treated much like arthritis affecting any other joint. Conservative (nonsurgical) treatment is usually initiated first, and surgery is reserved for those with progressive symptoms, or failure to improve with conservative treatment.

Nonsurgical Treatment

Activity modification, avoiding activities that make symptoms worse, can help in the early stages. Bracing and physical therapy are the mainstays of conservative treatment. Anti-inflammatory medications can help manage pain and inflammation.

Injections

Steroid injections into the basal thumb joint can be done in the office, often with ultrasound guidance, to provide immediate relief, with up to 2-3 months duration. Steroid injections are not curative, and subsequent injections or surgery may later be needed.



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Viscosupplementation (injection of hyaluronic acid) has been used to treat arthritis in other joints, particularly the knee. This medication can help to slow the progression of arthritis, and can sometimes stimulate cartilage renewal. It is not FDA-approved for the basal thumb joint, but has been used with success.

PRP, or other *biological*, can be injected into the joint. While its use in basal thumb joint arthritis has not been specifically studied, there has been success with PRP and other biological in other joints.

Surgery:

Surgery is often recommended for those who have progressive symptoms, and failure to improve with conservative treatment. There are a variety of surgical options for treating basal thumb joint arthritis including fusion, resection (removal) of the trapezium with or without ligament reconstruction, and joint replacement. Your surgeon will help to determine which is the best procedure for you, based on age, activity level, and expected long term outcomes.