

ARTHRITIS OF THE BASE OF THE THUMB

Thumb arthritis, or basal joint arthritis, is a condition that affects the base of the thumb, primarily the carpometacarpal (CMC) joint. This joint is formed by the trapezium bone of the wrist and the long bone of the thumb, providing both stability and mobility. Thumb arthritis most commonly results from osteoarthritis (OA), also known as degenerative joint disease (DJD), though it can also occur due to injury, age, overuse, and even rheumatoid arthritis (RA).

As we age, the cartilage lining the joint breaks down, which leads to rough and uneven bone growth. This causes inflammation, pain, swelling, and stiffness at the base of the thumb, particularly when engaging in activities that require pinching or gripping. Over time, the pain can worsen, causing difficulty with daily tasks such as turning keys, opening doors, or grasping objects, which may also be dropped due to weakness and loss of strength in the thumb.

There are four stages of thumb arthritis, based on how the joint and cartilage are affected. Early stages may show mild damage, while advanced stages can include bone spurs, joint space narrowing, and even joint dislocation. Treatment for thumb arthritis begins conservatively. Non-surgical options include anti-inflammatory medications, using heat or ice, splinting, ergonomic adjustments, and avoiding painful activities. Cortisone injections can also provide temporary pain relief. Occupational therapy can help improve joint function and reduce discomfort. However, as thumb arthritis is a degenerative condition, it often worsens over time.

When these non-operative treatments are no longer effective, surgery may be needed. Surgical options include

- Osteotomy: Trimming or cutting bone to correct joint deformity.
- Trapeziectomy: Removing the trapezium bone and reconstructing the thumb joint using tendon material to provide stability.

After surgery, patients typically wear a cast for support during recovery, followed by occupational/physical therapy to regain hand strength and motion. Most people can resume normal activities within three to six months, depending on the surgery type and recovery progress.

X-rays are essential in diagnosing and staging the disease, helping doctors determine the best course of treatment. There is no conclusive evidence that medications or supplements can prevent the progression of thumb arthritis, so treatment focuses on managing pain and maintaining thumb function.