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Physical Exam for Carpal Tunnel Syndrome

As part of the physical exam for carpal tunnel symptoms, your doctor will:

- Examine your neck, arms, wrists, and hands, comparing the strength and appearance of both sides.
- Check your thumb for strength and movement by watching you grip or pinch an object.
- Examine other parts of your arm, to check for problems with another nerve in your arm. If your doctor suspects neck-related problems, he or she will also check your neck for possible nerve compression.

One or more of the following tests are commonly used to diagnose carpal tunnel syndrome:

Tinel's sign test

Your doctor taps on the inside of your wrist over the median nerve. If you feel tingling, numbness, "pins and needles," or a mild "electrical shock" sensation in your hand when tapped on the wrist, you may have carpal tunnel syndrome.

Phalen's sign test

You hold your arms out in front of you and then flex your wrists, letting your hands hang down for about 60 seconds. If you feel tingling, numbness, or pain in the fingers within 60 seconds, you may have carpal tunnel syndrome.

Two-point discrimination test

This test is used when severe carpal tunnel syndrome is suspected. It is not very accurate for mild carpal tunnel syndrome. To do the test, your doctor has you close your eyes and then uses small instruments, such as the tips of two opened paper clips, to touch two points (fairly close together) on your hand or finger. Typically, you would feel separate touches if the two points are at least 0.5 cm (0.2 in.) apart. In severe carpal tunnel syndrome, you may not be able to tell the difference between the two touches, so it may feel as though only one place is being touched.

Why It Is Done

A physical exam with a focus on your neck, arms, wrists, and hands is done if there is tingling, numbness, weakness, or pain of the fingers, thumb, or hand. The exam is to help find out whether your symptoms are caused by compression of the median nerve as it passes through the carpal tunnel in the wrist (carpal tunnel syndrome).

Results

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Normal

There appears to be no sign of altered or loss of feeling or strength, or pain in the hand, wrist, arm, or neck during the physical exam.

Abnormal

Tinel's sign and Phalen's tests produce mild to severe signs of tingling, numbness, loss of feeling or strength, or pain in the hand.

What To Think About

If you have mild symptoms of tingling, numbness, loss of feeling or strength, or pain in a wrist or hand, you can start nonsurgical (conservative) treatment right away. Nonsurgical treatment includes rest, stopping activities that may be causing the symptoms, and the use of a wrist splint at night. Studies have not shown nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory [drugs \(NSAIDs\)](#) to be effective for carpal tunnel syndrome. But they may help relieve symptoms.

If it is not clear that the symptoms are caused by carpal tunnel syndrome, or if the condition is not improving with home treatment, your doctor may recommend nerve testing, X-rays, [MRI](#), [ultrasound](#), and/or [blood](#) tests. These test results should help to clarify your diagnosis.

Complete the [medical test information form \(PDF\)](#) to help you prepare for this test.

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