

Repetitive Strain Injury to the Thumb

Repetitive strain injuries can cause damage to your tendons, impair your ability to perform normal, everyday tasks and cause pain. The small joints within the thumb are especially susceptible to these types of injuries. Activities requiring thumb movements or using hand tools can end up leading to these injuries.

Tendons help to keep the bones in the thumb attached to the muscles. Moving the thumb requires the tendons to be able to glide through slipper tunnels known as sheaths. A repetitive stress injury can cause the sheaths to become inflamed. In De Quervain Disease, the tendons that move the thumb away from the hand and into a hitch-hiking up position can be injured by overusing the joint. Pain often occurs along the backside of the thumb and down into the wrist.

Causes of RSI of the Thumb

The most common causes of RSI of the thumb are:

- Keyboard typing with poor typing position
- “Text Thumb” – repeated texting on your phone
- Jobs or hobbies that involve a lot of gripping or kneading (massage is a good example).
- Vibrating hand tools such as drills.
- Video games.

How to Treat a Repetitive Strain Injury to the Thumb:

1. Splint

By splinting the thumb, it helps to restrict movement in the area. When the thumb remains in position, it allows it to rest and heal without being injured over and over again.

2. Anti-Inflammatory Medication or Ice

Taking an anti-inflammatory medication will help to relieve pain and inflammation in the thumb. When the swelling decreases, the amount of pain will also go down. Limit anti-inflammatories for 2 weeks, or follow the guidance of your doctor, but consider that Ice can be a very good anti-inflammatory. Placing an ice pack over the affected area for 10 minutes twice per day may help.

3. Physiotherapy or Manual Therapy

Manual therapy such as physiotherapy, osteopathy or massage can be used to reduce tension in the muscles. Manipulation to the neck and upper back can also help posture, which can have a positive effect on problems in the arm. Electrotherapy (for example ultrasound) and acupuncture can also help with chronic pain on the tendons.

4. Surgery

In severe cases of the condition, you might need to undergo surgery to help release the damaged tendon sheath and allow it the time it needs to heal properly.

Tips:

- Avoid using hand tools for more than a few minutes without stopping to give your hand a break.
- Playing video games for an extended period of time can cause the injury to occur.
- When you repeatedly use your thumb you are opening it up to repetitive strain injuries from the wear-and-tear placed on the joint.
- When playing sports, make sure your wrist and thumb are protected from potential injury.
- Take regular breaks if you start to get thumb pain, as you are probably over-using your thumb tendons.
- Perform thumb strengthening exercises as advised by your Rehab My Patient therapist.

