

CARPAL TUNNEL SURGERY RECOVERY

Patient Information



Recovering from Carpal Tunnel Surgery

What to expect: A patient's Guide

Carpal tunnel decompression surgery is a common and effective procedure for relieving the symptoms of carpal tunnel syndrome, such as numbness, tingling, and pain in the hand and fingers. If you're preparing for this surgery or have recently undergone it, understanding the recovery process can help you regain function, manage discomfort, and return to your normal activities with confidence. This guide will walk you through what to expect, including timescales for recovery, pain and scar management, and recommended exercises.

Understanding Carpal Tunnel Decompression Surgery

Carpal tunnel decompression (also known as carpal tunnel release) involves cutting the transverse carpal ligament to relieve pressure on the median nerve. The surgery can be performed as an open procedure or minimal access using Ultrasound to guide small instruments, but the recovery principles are similar for both.

Take a look at my information on scar management as well.

Immediate Post-Surgery: The First Few Days

What to Expect:

- Your hand will be bandaged, and you may have some swelling, bruising, and discomfort.
- Your fingers may feel stiff or weak, and you may experience numbness or tingling.
- The pain, pins and needles and tingling that you had before the operation usually disappear very quickly, in a few days.
- If you had permanent numbness in the fingers before the operation this may improve much more slowly, over months

Pain Management:

- Take prescribed painkillers or over-the-counter medications as directed.

- Keep your hand elevated above heart level as much as possible to reduce swelling.
- Apply an ice pack (wrapped in a towel) for 10-15 minutes at a time, several times a day.

Scar Care:

- Keep the dressing dry and clean.
- Do not remove the dressing until advised by your healthcare provider.
- Avoid soaking your hand in water (no baths or swimming).

First Week: Early Recovery

Movement and Activity:

- Begin gentle finger movements as soon as possible to prevent stiffness.
- Avoid heavy lifting, gripping, or twisting motions.
- You can do normal daily activities as pain allows

Pain and Scar Management:

- Continue with pain relief and elevation.
- You can take the large bandage off after 2 days but keep the wound covered with a dressing.
- Watch for signs of infection: increased redness, swelling, warmth, or discharge.

Exercises:

- Gently bend and straighten your fingers several times a day.
- Touch your thumb to each fingertip in turn.
- Make a gentle fist and then release.

1-2 Weeks: Stitches and Early Healing

Stitches Removal:

- Stitches are usually removed 10-14 days after surgery (if not dissolvable).
- Once stitches are out and the wound is healed, you can start gentle washing and moisturizing.

Regaining Movement:

- Continue finger exercises.
- Start gentle wrist movements as comfort allows.
- Avoid forceful gripping or weight-bearing.

Scar Management:

- Once the wound is closed, gently massage the scar with a non-perfumed moisturizer or vitamin E oil.
- Massage in circular motions for a few minutes, 2-3 times daily, to soften the scar and prevent adhesions.

2-6 Weeks: Building Strength and Function

Returning to Daily Activities:

- Light activities such as eating, dressing, and typing can usually be resumed within 2 weeks, depending on comfort.
- Avoid heavy lifting, forceful gripping, or repetitive wrist movements.
- The most common problem that people experience is tenderness around the scar, especially near the wrist. We call this “Pillar pain”. It settles with time, and scar management techniques.

Driving:

- You can usually return to driving when you can grip the steering wheel comfortably and perform an emergency stop safely—typically 1-2 weeks after surgery.

Returning to Work:

- Desk-based or light duties: 2-3 weeks, depending on pain and function.
- Manual or heavy work: 6-8 weeks, depending on recovery and job demands.
- Discuss your specific job requirements with your healthcare provider for tailored advice.

Exercises:

- Continue finger and wrist exercises.
- Add gentle resistance exercises using a soft ball or putty (squeeze and release).
- Practice wrist flexion and extension: rest your forearm on a table, palm down, and gently lift and lower your hand.

6-12 Weeks: Regaining Strength and Confidence

Movement and Strength:

- Most patients regain significant movement and strength by 6-8 weeks.
- Some residual weakness or discomfort may persist, especially with heavy use.

Daily Activities:

- Gradually increase activity levels as tolerated.
- Resume hobbies and sports as comfort allows, but avoid high-impact or repetitive activities until cleared by your surgeon.

Scar Management:

- Continue regular scar massage.
- Protect the scar from sun exposure to prevent darkening.

Pain Management:

- Occasional aches or twinges are normal but should gradually improve.
- If pain persists or worsens, consult your healthcare provider.

3-6 Months: Full Recovery

Strength and Function:

- Most people achieve full recovery within 3 months, though some may take up to 6 months for complete strength and sensation to return.
- Persistent numbness or weakness may occur, especially if nerve compression was severe or longstanding before surgery.

Returning to All Activities:

- By 3 months, most patients can return to all normal activities, including sports and manual work.
- Continue exercises to maintain flexibility and strength.

Recommended Exercises: See my information leaflet on exercises as well for some diagrams

1. Finger Bends

- Make a gentle fist, then straighten your fingers.
- Repeat 10 times, 3-4 times daily.

2. Thumb Opposition

- Touch your thumb to each fingertip in turn.
- Repeat 10 times, 3-4 times daily.

3. Tendon Gliding

- Start with your fingers straight.
- Bend the top and middle joints to make a hook, then straighten.
- Make a full fist, then straighten.
- Repeat 10 times, 3-4 times daily.

4. Wrist Flexion and Extension

- Rest your forearm on a table, palm down.
- Gently lift your hand up and down at the wrist.
- Repeat 10 times, 3-4 times daily.

5. Grip Strengthening

- Squeeze a soft ball or putty, hold for 5 seconds, then release.
- Repeat 10 times, 2-3 times daily (start after 3-4 weeks or as advised).

Tips for a Smooth Recovery

- **Follow your surgeon's instructions** carefully regarding wound care, activity restrictions, and follow-up appointments.
- **Be patient**—recovery is gradual, and everyone heals at their own pace.
- **Stay active** within your comfort zone to prevent stiffness and promote circulation.

- **Report any concerns** such as increasing pain, swelling, redness, or signs of infection to your healthcare provider promptly.
- **Consider hand therapy** if you have difficulty regaining movement or strength; a hand therapist can provide tailored exercises and support.

Frequently Asked Questions

How long will I have pain after surgery?

Mild to moderate pain is common for the first few days to weeks. Most people find pain improves significantly after 2-3 weeks.

When can I use my hand normally again?

Light activities can usually be resumed within 2-3 weeks. Full strength and function may take up to 3 months.

Will I have a scar?

Yes, but with proper care, the scar usually fades and softens over time.

What if my symptoms don't improve?

Some numbness or weakness may persist, especially if nerve compression was severe. If you're concerned, discuss this with your surgeon.

Summary Table: Recovery Milestones

| Time After Surgery | What to Expect / Do |

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0-2 weeks	Wound care, pain management, gentle finger movement, stitches out at 10-14 days
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2-3 weeks	Resume light activities, start gentle wrist movement, consider driving if safe
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3-6 weeks	Gradually increase activity, start grip strengthening, return to desk work
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6-12 weeks	Most movement and strength return, resume most activities, continue exercises
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3-6 months	Full recovery for most, return to all activities, persistent symptoms may need review
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Conclusion

Recovering from carpal tunnel decompression surgery is a journey that requires patience, self-care, and gradual return to activity. By following your healthcare provider's advice, practicing regular exercises, and managing pain and scars effectively, you can maximize your recovery and return to the activities you enjoy. If you have any concerns or your recovery isn't progressing as expected, don't hesitate to reach out to your medical team for support.

Disclaimer:

This guide is for informational purposes only and is not a substitute for professional medical advice. Always follow the instructions provided by your surgeon or healthcare provider.

