

Flexor Tendon Sheath Ganglion

A flexor sheath ganglion: a small firm cyst at the base of the finger.

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What you're feeling

You may notice a lump or swelling on the palm side of your wrist or hand. This is a ganglion cyst, which is a common, non-cancerous fluid-filled sac. It sits near the tendons that bend your fingers. You might feel a dull ache in this area. The pain often comes and goes. It tends to flare up after you use your hand for a long time. You may also feel discomfort when you first wake up in the morning.

As the condition progresses, you might experience triggering. This happens when the tendon thickens and catches as it moves through its sheath. Your finger may lock in a bent position. You might have to use your other hand to straighten it. This catching sensation can be startling and uncomfortable. In some cases, the cyst itself presses on the tendon at the wrist, causing similar locking issues there.

Daily tasks can become difficult. Simple movements like reaching behind your back to fasten a bra may hurt. Tucking in a shirt or gripping a steering wheel can feel stiff and painful. You might avoid lifting heavy objects because it aggravates the area. Sleeping on the side of your affected hand can be particularly uncomfortable due to the pressure on the lump.

It is important to know that these symptoms are manageable. Your surgeon can help you understand exactly what is happening inside your hand. While the thickening of the tendon often happens before you feel triggering, the pain and stiffness are real and valid. You are not imagining the difficulty with these everyday motions. Treatment options, such as surgical removal of the cyst, are simple and effective. This approach aims to relieve your pain and restore smooth movement to your tendons.

What's actually happening

A ganglion is a fluid-filled lump that forms near your tendons. In this case, it sits inside the sheath that covers the flexor tendon. This sheath is the slippery tunnel that allows your tendon to slide smoothly as you bend your fingers. Think of the tendon like a rope and the sheath like the sleeve around it. The ganglion is a small balloon of fluid that bulges into this sleeve.

This lump can cause pain and make it difficult to move your finger. It may feel like the finger is catching or locking. Your surgeon can remove this ganglion safely. Surgical excision is a simple, safe, and effective method for treating a painful ganglion of the digital flexor tendon sheath. The goal is to relieve your pain and restore normal movement.

When treating a ganglion that grows inside the tendon itself, your surgeon takes extra care. The ganglion can weaken the tendon fibers. Therefore, treatment must include preserving the tendon. Your surgeon will remove the cyst while keeping the tendon strong and intact. This approach ensures you can continue to use your hand without long-term weakness.

Understanding how these structures work helps explain your symptoms. The tendon and its surrounding tissues are designed for smooth, repetitive motion. When a ganglion is present, it disrupts this flow. It creates friction and pressure within the tight space of the finger or thumb. This is why you feel discomfort or stiffness. By addressing the source of the irritation, your surgeon helps your hand return to its natural function.

What we can do about it

You can start with self-management and physiotherapy. Your surgeon may suggest splinting to rest the hand and wrist. This helps reduce irritation in the tendon sheath. Physical therapy aims to keep the joint moving smoothly. You might also try gentle exercises to improve strength. These non-surgical steps are often enough to manage symptoms. Give this approach a fair trial before considering more invasive options.

If rest and therapy do not bring enough relief, your surgeon may discuss medical management. Pain medication and anti-inflammatories can help control discomfort. Injections are another common option. Cortisone injections reduce swelling and calm inflammation in the sheath. Hyaluronic acid injections may help lubricate the joint space. Platelet-rich plasma (PRP) injections use your own blood components to support healing. These treatments target the pain and stiffness directly. The effect of these injections can vary, but they often provide significant relief for several months. Your surgeon will choose the best injection type for your specific case. For trigger finger caused by a volar wrist ganglion, interventional radiological measures might be an option instead of open surgery. This minimally invasive needle-knife technique has shown a 99% satisfactory result rate with no injuries to flexor tendons, arteries, or nerves. When injections are needed, the mid-axial injection technique is the most accurate way to deliver medicine into the sheath without risking damage to the tendon itself.

Surgery is considered only when conservative care has reached its limit. This means you have tried rest, therapy, and injections without lasting improvement. Your surgeon will discuss surgical excision if the ganglion remains painful or limits your movement. This is a simple, safe, and effective method for treating a painful ganglion of the digital flexor tendon sheath. The goal is to remove the cyst while preserving the tendon. Since ganglions can weaken the tendon, your surgeon will take care to protect it during the procedure. The operation itself is detailed on its own page, but the main aim is to relieve your pain and restore normal function.

What to expect

A ganglion cyst in your finger's flexor tendon sheath is a common, benign lump. It is not cancer and will not spread. You may notice the lump appearing and disappearing over time. Some people find it painless, while others experience discomfort or stiffness.

If you choose to leave it alone, the cyst may stay the same size, shrink, or go away on its own. However, it can also grow larger or become more painful. If the cyst presses on the tendon, it might cause triggering, where your finger catches or locks when you bend it. This thickening of the tendon often happens before you feel any locking sensation, except in the thumb.

Surgical removal is a simple, safe, and effective way to treat a painful ganglion. Your surgeon will remove the cyst while carefully preserving the tendon. The tendon may be weakened by the cyst, so protecting it is a key part of the procedure. Many patients find that removing the cyst relieves pain and improves hand function.

Recovery involves healing the skin and allowing the tendon to move freely again. You might experience some stiffness in your finger after the procedure. This is normal. Even with careful treatment, some residual stiffness can remain for a while as the tissues settle. Your surgeon will guide you on gentle movements to keep the finger flexible without straining the repair.

Most people return to their normal daily activities as the swelling goes down and strength returns. The goal is to have a pain-free finger that moves smoothly. While outcomes are generally good, individual results can vary based on how your body heals. Your surgeon will discuss what is realistic for your specific situation during your consultation.

When to see someone

Ask for a specialist review if you notice a mass in your hand or wrist. Ganglion cysts are common benign lesions that may present as these masses. Seek care if you experience triggering pathology at the wrist, as a volar wrist ganglion can present this way. See your GP if you have persistent pain not improving with rest. Ask for a specialist review if you feel weakness or instability. See your doctor if your finger locks or gives way. Seek help if symptoms interfere with sleep or work. Sudden worsening of these signs also warrants prompt evaluation. Clinical examination is a valuable tool for detecting flexor disease, so professional assessment is key to getting the right diagnosis and treatment.