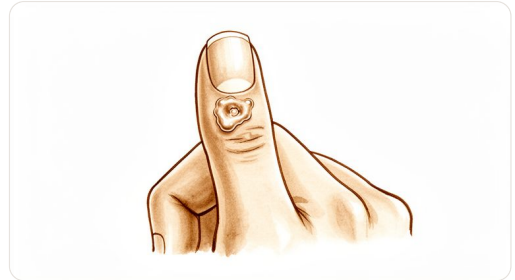


Mucous Cyst

A mucous cyst on the thumb: a small fluid-filled bump that arises from the worn-out joint at the tip of the finger or thumb.

Kieran Hirpara 4.0



What you're feeling

You may notice a small, firm bump on the top of your finger, usually near the last joint. This bump is a mucous cyst. It often feels like a small pea under the skin. You might see it clearly if your skin is thin there. The cyst can make the skin over it look shiny or stretched. In some cases, it may cause the fingernail to grow in a wavy or ridged pattern.

The area around the cyst can feel tender or achy. You might feel pain when you press on it or when you bend your finger. Daily tasks can become difficult. Reaching for objects, typing, or gripping tools may hurt. You might find it hard to fasten buttons or zip up a jacket. Some people report that the pain is worse at night or after using their hands for a long time. The discomfort can interfere with sleeping if you rest on that hand.

Your surgeon will look at the cyst and check how it affects your finger's movement. The pain often comes from the underlying joint changes, not just the bump itself. Removing the cyst alone might not stop the pain if the bone spur (osteophyte) remains. Your surgeon may discuss removing the bone spur to help relieve pressure on the joint and skin. This approach can help the skin heal better and reduce the chance of the cyst coming back.

In many cases, treating the bone spur leads to complete resolution of the cyst. You may not need complex surgery. Simple removal of the cyst combined with bone spur removal has an extremely rare recurrence rate. Even less invasive options, like removing just the bone spur, can provide complete resolution in most cases. If a skin flap is needed, patient satisfaction regarding the scar is high. You are likely to be happy with the appearance and willing to have the procedure again.

Your surgeon will tailor the plan to your specific needs. The goal is to relieve your pain and restore function. Most patients find that after treatment, their finger feels more comfortable and looks better. The skin has good recovery potential once the main problem is addressed. You can expect a straightforward recovery with careful wound care.

What's actually happening

A mucous cyst is a small, fluid-filled sac that forms on your finger. It usually appears near the tip of the finger, close to the nail bed. The cyst sits on top of the joint capsule, which is the tough, fibrous sleeve that wraps around your joint to keep it stable.

The root cause is wear-and-tear arthritis in the joint. As the cartilage—the smooth coating on the ends of your bones—breaks down, your body tries to repair the damage. This process often creates bone spurs, called osteophytes. These are small, rough bumps of extra bone that grow out from the joint surface.

Think of the joint capsule like a gasket or a seal. When the bone spur rubs against this seal, it irritates the tissue. This irritation causes the joint lining to leak synovial fluid, which is the natural lubricant that keeps your joint moving smoothly. The fluid pushes through the weakened spot in the capsule, forming the visible bump you see on your skin.

Because the cyst is connected to the joint, it is filled with this same lubricating fluid. The pressure from the fluid can make the skin over the cyst thin and fragile. In some cases, the cyst can press on nearby nerves or affect the nail matrix, which is the tissue under your cuticle that grows your nail. This pressure is what leads to the grooves or ridges you might see in your nail.

Removing just the cyst often leads to it coming back because the bone spur remains. The spur continues to irritate the joint lining, causing more fluid to leak. To stop this cycle, the underlying bone spur must be addressed. When the spur is removed, the irritation stops, and the joint lining can heal. This is why treating the bone is just as important as treating the cyst itself.

What we can do about it

Your journey usually begins with simple self-care and professional guidance. You can try resting the finger and avoiding activities that put pressure on the cyst. Physiotherapy helps you maintain movement in the joint and keeps the surrounding muscles strong. This approach aims to reduce irritation and improve function without invasive steps. You should give this conservative care a fair trial to see if symptoms settle. Many patients find that managing daily habits and following a gentle exercise plan provides enough relief to avoid further intervention.

If self-care is not enough, your surgeon may suggest medical management to control pain and inflammation. Corticosteroid injections are a common option for these cysts. A volar corticosteroid injection allows for easy and consistent needle placement into the joint. This method minimizes potential soft tissue damage and infection risks compared to other techniques. The injection helps calm the inflammation that drives cyst growth. While the evidence highlights the safety and ease of this approach, it is important to understand that injections typically manage symptoms rather than permanently remove the cyst. The effect lasts for a period of time, but the underlying wear-and-tear arthritis remains. You and your surgeon will decide if this temporary relief is sufficient or if further steps are needed.

Surgery is considered when conservative care has reached its limit and the cyst causes persistent pain, deformity, or functional problems. Your surgeon will discuss the best surgical option for your specific case. The goal is to remove the cyst and address the root cause, which is often bone spurs (osteophytes) from arthritis. Removing these bone spurs is crucial because it significantly lowers the chance of the cyst coming back. Some techniques involve removing the cyst along with a small skin flap to ensure proper healing, while others focus primarily on the bone. Your surgeon will choose the method that offers the best balance of low recurrence rates and good cosmetic results for your hand.

What to expect

Mucous cysts are small, fluid-filled lumps that often appear near the end joint of your finger or thumb. They are closely linked to wear-and-tear arthritis in that joint. Because they stem from this underlying joint change, the cyst itself may persist or return if the root cause is not addressed. However, with proper treatment, the outlook is generally very positive.

Your surgeon will likely recommend removing the cyst along with any bone spurs (osteophytes) causing it. This approach eradicates mucous cysts with extremely rare recurrence. If your surgeon chooses a technique using a local advancement skin flap, the recurrence rate is low at 1.4%. In some cases, your surgeon may remove only the bone spur without taking out the cyst. This less invasive method provides complete resolution in most cases. Regardless of the specific plan for the soft tissues, your surgeon will remove the bone spur to prevent the cyst from coming back.

You can expect high satisfaction with the results, particularly regarding the appearance of the scar. Many patients report they would undergo the procedure again. The surgical techniques used are designed to be simple and reliable. For example, some methods allow for the removal of thinned skin without adding risk to your nail matrix. Others use skin grafts that provide satisfactory cosmetic results with acceptable recurrence rates. Even complex cases, such as cysts growing inside the digital nerve, can result in successful outcomes.

If left untreated, the cyst may remain or grow, potentially thinning the skin and increasing the risk of infection. By addressing both the cyst and the underlying arthritis, your surgeon aims for a lasting solution. Most patients find that their finger looks and feels better after the procedure. The goal is not just to remove the lump, but to stop it from returning. You can expect a straightforward recovery process focused on protecting the surgical site while allowing your joint to heal.

When to see someone

See your GP if you notice a small bump on your finger near the nail. Ask for a specialist review if the cyst causes persistent pain that does not improve with rest. Seek care if you experience weakness or instability in the joint. Watch for locking or giving way sensations. Contact your surgeon if symptoms interfere with sleep or work. Sudden worsening of the area also warrants a check-up. Early evaluation helps prevent complications. Your surgeon can discuss options like removing the cyst and any bone spurs. This approach often leads to high satisfaction and low recurrence rates. Treating the underlying cause helps the skin recover naturally.