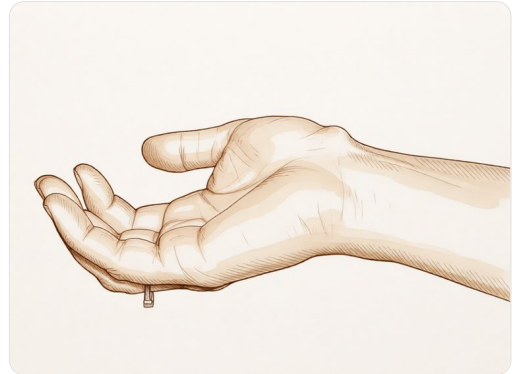


Wrist Ganglia

A wrist ganglion: a smooth, dome-shaped fluid-filled sac that pushes up through the back of the wrist from the joint underneath.

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What you're feeling

You may notice a lump on your wrist. It is often soft and can change size. If the lump is on the back of your wrist, you might feel pain there. Women with this type of ganglion are most likely to have pain that stays after surgery. The pain may flare up when you move your wrist.

If the lump is on the palm side of your wrist, it might feel like a tight band. This can catch your finger. You may experience a clicking or locking sensation when you bend your finger. This feels like trigger finger. You might find it hard to grip objects or type comfortably.

Daily tasks can become difficult. Reaching behind your back to fasten a bra may hurt. Tucking in a shirt can be awkward if it stretches the skin over the lump. Sleeping on the side of your affected wrist may disturb your rest. If your job or hobbies require forceful bending of your wrist backward, you are at considerable risk for ongoing pain and limited movement after treatment.

Children often have lumps on the back of the wrist. Girls are more likely to have these than boys. For children under 10, the lump is usually on the palm side. In most cases, these lumps go away on their own within 12 to 18 months. You do not need routine X-rays to check for this, as they rarely change how your surgeon treats it.

If the lump does not go away or causes pain, your surgeon may suggest watching it for about 2 months. Splinting can help. If it persists, surgery is an option. Surgery removes the lump and significantly reduces symptoms. The chance of the lump coming back is low after surgery. Arthroscopy, which uses small cameras, is a safe and effective way to remove dorsal wrist lumps.

Avoid treatments that inject thickening agents into the lump. These can cause serious harm, including injury to the radial artery. If you need an MRI to confirm the diagnosis, it is reliable. It correctly identifies the lump in 83% of cases when compared to surgical findings.

What's actually happening

A ganglion is a fluid-filled sac that forms near your wrist joint or tendons. Think of it like a small water balloon that leaks out from the joint lining. The joint capsule is the tough sleeve that holds your wrist bones together and keeps lubricating fluid in place. Sometimes, this lining weakens or tears, allowing fluid to push through and form a lump.

You might notice this lump on the top (dorsal) or bottom (volar) of your wrist. Women are significantly more likely to be diagnosed with a volar wrist ganglion, regardless of age or military status. If you have pediatric ganglions, they most commonly affect the dorsal wrist and show a female predilection. Pediatric ganglions of the hand have a greater rate of resolution than ganglions of the wrist.

The fluid inside is thick and jelly-like, similar to the lubricant that helps your tendons slide smoothly. When this sac grows, it can press on nearby nerves or structures. This pressure is often what causes your pain or limits your movement. Patients with wrist hyperlaxity have a predisposition to developing ganglions. This means if your joints are naturally looser, you may be more prone to these cysts forming.

Your surgeon may use magnetic resonance imaging to evaluate pain in the wrist when the appropriate pulse sequence is used. This scan provides a clear, non-invasive look at the soft tissues. However, routinely performing wrist radiography is not cost-effective in the evaluation and treatment decision-making process for patients with a wrist ganglion due to a low prevalence of therapeutically significant findings. Most wrist MRIs in a pediatric institution were ordered for wrist pain, helping your doctor see exactly where the fluid is coming from.

Understanding the source of the lump helps explain why some treatments work better than others. Because the sac is connected to the joint, simply draining it often leads to it filling up again. This is why your surgeon discusses options like observation, splinting, or surgical excision based on your specific symptoms and lifestyle.

What we can do about it

You can start by watching the lump and letting it rest. This is called expectant management. It works well for many people, especially children. In children under 10 years old, 69% to 79% of these cysts go away on their own within 12-18 months. Your surgeon may suggest splinting to keep your wrist still. This helps reduce irritation. Most pediatric hand and wrist ganglions resolve with observation or splinting alone. You should give this approach at least two months to work. If the cyst is painful or does not shrink, we will discuss other options.

We do not routinely order X-rays for this condition. They rarely change how we treat you because they rarely show useful findings. If you have pain, your surgeon may prescribe anti-inflammatory medication. These drugs help calm the swelling and ease discomfort. They do not remove the cyst, but they make daily life more comfortable. Some patients find relief with a splint worn during the day or night. This limits movement and reduces stress on the joint. We avoid injecting substances like sclerosants into the cyst. This practice has been stopped because it can cause serious harm, such as injury to the radial artery in your wrist.

Surgery is considered if the cyst remains painful after conservative care fails. It is also an option if the lump returns after initial treatment. Surgical excision significantly reduces symptoms and has a low rate of the cyst coming back. Most patients report high satisfaction after the procedure. Your surgeon will choose between open surgery or arthroscopic surgery (using small cameras). Open surgery has a lower chance of the cyst returning compared to other methods. However, if your job or hobbies require forceful wrist extension, you may face a considerable risk of residual pain or functional limits after open excision. Arthroscopic treatment is a safe and effective alternative, though it requires specific surgical expertise. We will review your specific risks and benefits before deciding on the best path for you.

What to expect

Your outlook depends largely on your age and the location of the cyst. If you are a child under 10, the cyst is likely on the palm side of your wrist. In this case, it often goes away on its own. About 69% to 79% of these cysts disappear within 12 to 18 months without any treatment. Your surgeon may suggest watching it closely or using a splint.

For adults, the cyst is usually on the back of the wrist. These rarely resolve without help. About 40% of wrist ganglions shrink over the first six years after you see a hand surgeon. However, most cysts do not go away completely on their own. If you choose to leave it alone, you may experience ongoing discomfort or a visible lump.

If you decide on treatment, surgical removal significantly reduces your symptoms. Most patients report high satisfaction with the results. The chance of the cyst coming back after surgery is low, at about 10%. This is much better than trying to drain it with a needle, which often leads to the cyst returning.

Be aware that some factors can affect your recovery. If you are female and had pain around the cyst before surgery, you are more likely to have some residual pain afterward. Also, if your job or hobbies require forceful bending of your wrist backward, you face a higher risk of lasting pain or limited movement after open surgery. Your surgeon will discuss these risks with you to ensure the best outcome for your specific lifestyle.

When to see someone

Ask for a specialist review if you have persistent pain that does not improve with rest. Seek care if you notice weakness or instability in your wrist. See your doctor if your wrist locks or gives way during use. You should also seek help if symptoms interfere with your sleep or work. Ask for an evaluation if you experience a sudden worsening of your condition. Your surgeon can determine if the ganglion requires treatment or if observation is best. Early assessment helps prevent complications and ensures you get the right care for your specific situation.