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Acupuncture: A Viable Treatment for Carpal Tunnel Syndrome

Repetitive stress injuries (RSI) are the most common job-related injuries and are responsible for the highest number of days lost. One of the most well-known types of repetitive stress injuries, carpal tunnel syndrome (CTS) accounts for over two million visits to physicians' offices and approximately 465,000 carpal tunnel release operations each year, making it the most frequent surgery of the hand and wrist.



Symptoms of repetitive stress injuries include tightness, stiffness, pain, tingling, numbness, coldness and loss of strength in the arm. Carpal tunnel syndrome is a repetitive stress injury that refers specifically to the inflammation of a specific ligament that puts pressure on the median nerve.

Acupuncture is extremely effective for treating repetitive stress injuries, including carpal tunnel syndrome, and often eliminates the need for surgery or the use of anti-inflammatory drugs or corticosteroids. In fact, one of the most common reasons that people get acupuncture is for repetitive stress injuries.

What is Carpal Tunnel Syndrome?

The carpal tunnel is suitably named as it is literally a tunnel located in the lower arm that encases and protects part of the median nerve. The median nerve controls sensory functions in the palm and all fingers (except the pinkie). It also enables impulses to some small muscles in the hand that allow the fingers and thumb to move. Even though some repetitive motions such as typing on the computer or using the phone are not strenuous activities in and of themselves, if performed often enough, a cumulative effect builds up.

Carpal tunnel syndrome, also known as median nerve entrapment, occurs when swelling or irritation of the tendons in the carpal tunnel results in pressure on the median nerve, causing pain in the palm-side of the wrist and pain and tingling in the fingers. These symptoms often, but not always, result from inflammation due to frequent, repetitive physical movements. However, inflammation can also be a product of an injury, such as a wrist sprain, or certain diseases, such as rheumatoid arthritis.

Symptoms usually start gradually and become worse over time, especially if the same motions are repeated on a near daily basis. Those with carpal tunnel syndrome usually experience frequent burning, tingling, or numbness in the palm of the hand and the fingers, especially the index, middle and ring fingers. Pain can sometimes travel up the arm and affect the shoulder. The symptoms often first appear during the night. As symptoms worsen, people might feel pain, weakness, or numbness in the hand and wrist, radiating up the arm during the day. Decreased grip strength may make it difficult to form a fist, grasp small objects, or perform other manual tasks. If not properly treated, CTS can cause irreversible nerve damage and permanent deterioration of muscle tissue.

Diagnosis and Treatment of Carpal Tunnel Syndrome with Acupuncture

From an Oriental medicine perspective, a repetitive stress injury is seen as a disruption of the flow of Qi and Blood (Xue) within the area, and is associated with cold, dampness or wind penetrating the muscles and

sinews. Acupuncture points, stretching exercises, herbal remedies and nutritional supplements are chosen to treat accordingly.

In addition to reducing swelling, inflammation and pain, acupuncture also addresses headaches, neck pain, shoulder stiffness and sleeping problems that often accompany this condition. Your treatment may also take into account any underlying conditions that contribute to its development, including posture, obesity, rheumatoid arthritis, thyroid problems, diabetes and hormonal changes due to pregnancy or menopause.

If you or someone you know suffers from carpal tunnel syndrome or a repetitive stress injury, call and make an appointment today!

Study Finds Acupuncture Effective in Treating Carpal Tunnel Syndrome

Acupuncture is as effective as the corticosteroid, prednisone, for the treatment of carpal tunnel syndrome (CTS), according to a 2009 study published in *The Clinical Journal of Pain*.

The randomized, controlled study investigated the efficacy of acupuncture compared with steroid treatment in patients with mild-to-moderate carpal tunnel syndrome as measured by both nerve conduction studies and symptom assessment surveys.

Patients with mild to moderate symptoms of carpal tunnel syndrome were split into two groups. One group received eight sessions of acupuncture treatments over the course of eight weeks. The other group received daily doses of a drug called prednisolone, a steroid used to reduce inflammation and relieve pain.

Evaluations at the end of the second and fourth week revealed that both groups enjoyed a significant reduction in symptoms. However, the acupuncture group received an exceptional benefit that the steroid group did not. At the conclusion of the trial, the patients receiving acupuncture treatments showed a statistically significant drop in their nocturnal awakenings.

The researchers concluded that acupuncture is just as worthy and viable a treatment for those suffering from mild to moderate symptoms of carpal tunnel syndrome as taking the drug prednisolone. This is good news for patients who cannot tolerate oral steroids or prefer to handle their condition without the use of pharmaceutical drugs.

Source: Yang, C., Hsieh, C., Wang, N., Li, T., Hwang, K., Yu, S., & Chang, M. (2009). *Acupuncture in Patients With Carpal Tunnel Syndrome*. *The Clinical Journal of Pain*, 25(4), 327-333.
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Reduce Your Repetitive Stress Injury Risk

Managing repetitive stress injuries often requires some lifestyle changes. It can take time to find a strategy that works best for you. Here are a few minor changes you can implement to minimize stress on your hands and wrists:

Alternate Tasks -- avoid doing the same task for more than a couple of hours at a time and alternate between tasks that use different muscle groups where possible.

Take a Break -- fatigue is a sign that you need to take a break. Take small breaks to gently stretch and bend your hands and wrists and readjust your position.

Reduce Pressure -- many people use more force than needed to perform tasks involving their hands, which can increase pressure and cause irritation. Be mindful of the speed and amount of pressure used to perform tasks. Ease up, slow down and grip using your palm or whole hand to distribute the load. If using tools such as riveters or jackhammers for extended periods, take frequent breaks or operate the tool at a speed that causes the least amount of vibration.

Cultivate Good Posture -- incorrect posture can cause your shoulders to roll forward, shortening neck and shoulder muscles and compressing nerves in your neck, which can affect your wrists, hands and fingers. Your shoulders and neck should be relaxed to open the chest and allow your head to float upwards without strain. When using a keyboard, wrists should be in a relaxed middle position and in a straight line with your forearms at elbow height or slightly lower.

3 Easy Exercises for Carpal Tunnel Relief

Here are some easy exercises to help relieve pain and other symptoms

Posture Adjustment

If you are on a computer all day, or if you are engaged in any other repetitive daily activity, consider setting an alarm for every 20 minutes. This will help remind you to change your posture, perform some stretches, or just take a break. Keep your head up and your shoulders relaxed, but not slouched. Maintaining good posture, whether sitting or standing, can help keep symptoms of carpal tunnel syndrome at bay.



Prayer Stretch

Put the palms of your hand together, press lightly and hold the pose for 30 seconds. Take a break for 10 seconds, then repeat up to four times. In a variation of this pose, you can hold your hands out in front of you as though you were pushing them up against a wall. Hold for 30 seconds, then shake your hands out. Repeat up to four times. To stretch in the other direction, make your hands into fists and bend your wrist downwards. This can be done for about 30 seconds, and then the wrists should be straightened and the fingers relaxed. Do this up to four times. Another very simple technique is to make a fist, then open it up and fan out your fingers. Do this as many times as feels good.

Palm Up Stretch

Take one hand, with the palm side up, and extend it to your side. If using your left hand, then extend it to your left side. With your arm completely extended at the level of your shoulder, with your palm still facing upwards, point your fingertips downwards. You should feel a good stretch throughout the entire length of your arm. To increase this stretch, gently tilt your ear towards the opposite shoulder. If your left hand is extended, then you will tilt your head to the right. This last exercise can also help give your neck a good stretch.
