What is Carpal Tunnel Syndrome

The carpal tunnel is a narrow passageway in the underside of the wrist that opens into the hand. The median nerve along with tendons, veins and arteries all pass through this small area. The median nerve gives sensation to the thumb, forefinger, middle finger, and half of the ring finger. Carpal tunnel syndrome occurs when this nerve is compressed or irritated in the carpal tunnel.

CAUSES OF CARPAL TUNNEL SYNDROME IN PREGNANCY

During pregnancy some women will have an increase in fluid retention and may notice swelling in the hands and feet. The increase in fluid in the hands can cause the median nerve to be compressed in the small carpal tunnel space.

Further irritation can occur in women who have occupations where the hands are used a lot (e.g. food preparation, typing, manual work).

SIGNS OF CARPAL TUNNEL SYNDROME

Symptoms commonly present in the distribution of the nerve (sometimes further up the arm to the shoulder) as:
• Numbness
• Pins and needles
• Wrist pain and/or
• Stiffness

In severe cases some women may feel that they become weak or clumsy in the thumb and/or hand.

Symptoms are usually worse at night or first thing in the morning (as fluid pools without regular activity or sleeping postures compress the wrist) and can cause patients to wake from sleep.

Women commonly report that they feel the need to shake their hands to relieve their symptoms.

PHYSIOTHERAPY FOR CARPAL TUNNEL SYNDROME

Depending on the severity of your symptoms, your physiotherapist may suggest:
• Splinting: (night or day or both)
  This is a brace to help keep your wrist straight and your carpal tunnel space open.
• Specific Exercises
• Ultrasound

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Circulatory exercises
Clenching and unclenching your hands while they are raised above your head can assist in fluid movement away from the carpal tunnel relieving pressure on the median nerve. Repeat 10 – 15 times per hour.

Contrast baths
Contrast baths can increase circulation and reduce inflammation. Fill two bowls, one with warm water and the other with cold water and a few ice cubes. (Neither should cause burning, remove immediately if they do). Place the hand in the warm water bowl for one minute and then in the cold water bowl for another minute. Repeat this 3 times, finishing in the cold water.

Massage
• Elevate your arm by resting it on a pillow, stroke your arm (alternate front and back) with light slow strokes from your fingertips to your armpit.
• Massage your wrist specifically to move fluid from the carpal tunnel. To do this, turn your hand so it is facing upward, massage with your thumb from the centre to the side of your wrist, one side, then the other. Follow this with massage from the centre of your wrist up towards the elbow. Continue for 2 minutes.

Ice
For relief of pain and inflammation wrap a packet of peas or a flexible ice pack in a damp dish cloth or towel, place directly over the palm and wrist. It may feel numb but if you feel pain or a burning sensation then remove it immediately. Leave the ice on for 10 – 15 minutes. This may be repeated 1-2 hourly or as needed.

After delivery of your baby
Most cases of carpal tunnel have improved by 4 – 6 weeks after delivery when swelling has decreased. For some women symptoms can persist as poor feeding posture and the demands of caring for your baby can continue to irritate the area. If your symptoms continue after your baby is 6 weeks old you should consult your doctor or physiotherapist.