



PARTNER UPDATE

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WORK PARTNERS OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH SPECIALISTS

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Trigger Finger in the Workplace



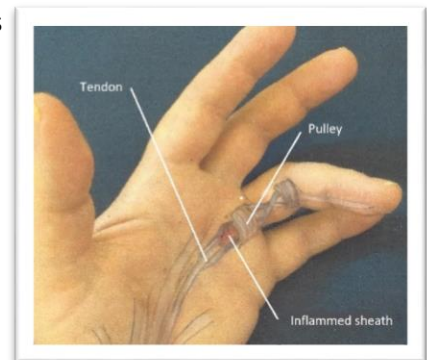
Katie Klarer OTR/L, CHT, CKTP

Director of Occupational Therapy

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What is a trigger finger and why does it cause so much pain?

A trigger finger involves the tendons in the hand that bend the finger. Tendons connect muscle to bone and operate as a cable-like structure that pulls or bends a bone when the muscle contracts. A trigger finger results from the inflammation of the sheath surrounding each tendon. As the inflammation gets worse, the swelling gets caught underneath the bands (or pulleys) that hold these tendons in place. Swelling can develop at different parts of the finger, and symptoms can be felt in the finger, the palm or even the wrist of the involved hand.



What are the symptoms of trigger finger?

Symptoms of trigger finger vary, but may begin as a grinding or clicking sensation. The involved finger may feel more stiff than usual. As symptoms progress and the inflammation gets worse a soft nodule may develop. A tenderness and swelling may be felt at the base of the finger or thumb. Eventually the affected finger may stay bent inward towards the palm of the hand and be difficult and painful to straighten. The finger may 'pop' as it releases and straightens like the trigger of a gun. Often the affected finger feels worse in the mornings and as it warms up begins to feel better. As the finger is repetitively flexed and straightened throughout the day, the finger again becomes more likely to painfully catch.

What are the causes of trigger finger?

Chronic conditions can develop through repetitive gripping and pinching. Use of tools such as wrenches, pliers or vibratory tools such as power drills or jack hammers can precipitate this condition. Often, an acute injury to the palm or finger will produce swelling that persists long after the initial injury, and eventually a trigger finger will develop. Pre-existing conditions, such as diabetes or arthritis, can be associated with trigger finger.

What are the treatments of trigger finger?

Typical treatments for trigger finger revolve around trying to decrease the inflammation surrounding the tendon. Oral or topical anti-inflammatories can initially help to decrease the swelling. Ice massage is another effective technique to decrease inflammation. A Certified Hand Therapist can help analyze and modify work tasks by reducing pinching and gripping, avoiding power tools and/or wearing anti-vibration gloves. Enlarging grip handles is helpful in reducing the amount of opening and closing of the fingers. Reducing and restricting movement of the finger is also made possible by the use of splints.

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Splints (more properly called orthoses) will vary depending on the area of the finger where the triggering or



inflammation occurs. A Certified Hand Therapist is most knowledgeable in assessing the appropriateness of this treatment. If the inflammation and triggering occurs solely in the finger, a simple off-the-shelf finger sleeve may be sufficient. If the inflammation is in the wrist, an orthosis which crosses the wrist will be required. Most often the inflammation occurs in the palm, and an orthosis which immobilizes the hand and the finger is needed. These orthoses can be off-the-shelf or custom-fabricated. Custom-fabrication can be advantageous to accommodate the specialized actions of each job position. If these treatments are not effective, a cortisone injection may be recommended as a more aggressive approach to decreasing inflammation.

Beyond this, if the trigger finger continues to persist, surgery may be recommended to clean the affected area and release the constriction so that the tendon can glide more freely. The recovery time for the worker to return to unrestricted work is typically 4-8 weeks, focused on reducing the swelling produced from the surgery itself and preventing scar tissue adhesions. At this stage, reinforcement of work modifications continues to be a pivotal factor in successful return to work.

How can trigger finger be prevented?

Prevention of trigger finger injuries begins with regular stretching to help rebalance the soft tissue and move the built-up fluid surrounding the tendons. Work modifications, such as those mentioned above, should be implemented early to avoid the onset of this condition. Regular icing when hands are sore is a great technique to prevent chronic inflammation. If you, or your employee, suspect the onset of a trigger finger, early intervention is key to avoid persistent inflammation and pain. As is so often the case with cumulative trauma disorders, an early and short course of action can circumvent months of treatment with a chronic condition.

About  **WorkPartners Occupational Health Specialists**

Located in San Diego County, WorkPartners clinics are full service Occupational Health clinics dedicated to supporting the health and wellness of local employees. Learn more at www.WorkPartnersOHS.com.