

IN GOOD HEALTH

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A HELPING HAND: EXPERT TREATMENT FOR HAND AND WRIST PROBLEMS

It's easy to take for granted the ability to perform simple, everyday activities like picking up a cup of coffee or holding a pen. But for many people with hand and wrist problems, these activities can become impossible.

Elizabeth Hassett, a Brooklyn resident, understands what it is like to lose the function of her hands. After suffering a stroke that affected her right hand, Ms. Hassett used her left hand to perform most activities. However, she soon developed a condition in her left hand that limited its use as well, greatly decreasing her quality of life.

"I had pain throughout my left hand and my thumb became very stiff. After a while, I couldn't pick up anything without it falling out of my hand. I needed help," explained Ms. Hassett.

Ms. Hassett found a solution with the help of orthopedic surgeon S. Steven Yang, MD, Lenox Hill Hospital's chief of hand and upper extremity surgery and an expert in the evaluation, care and treatment of hand and wrist problems.

"Patients don't need to live with pain or dysfunction in their hand or wrist," explained Dr. Yang. "In many cases, treatment can help reduce or eliminate symptoms and prevent the problem from getting worse."

"With everyone now typing and swiping on electronic devices all day long, early diagnosis and treatment of wrist and hand disorders are critical in preventing a minor, self-limited problem from becoming a long-term issue that requires major surgical treatment."

*Elliott Hershman, MD, chairman,
orthopedic surgery*

Dr. Yang and the Lenox Hill Hospital orthopedic surgery team use the latest imaging techniques to help diagnose the source of hand or wrist symptoms. The problem is then treated using the least invasive options possible, including rest, splinting, anti-inflammatory medications and cortisone injections. If these therapies do not provide relief, surgeons can offer more advanced treatment options.

This was the case with Ms. Hassett, who suffered from carpal tunnel syndrome and severe osteoarthritis in her thumb, which had worn down the joint beyond repair. Dr. Yang performed outpatient surgery to address both problems.

The arthritic joint was replaced and reconstructed using a soft

tissue interposition technique. Although most joint replacement procedures require the use of an artificial implant made of metal and plastic, this surgery uses a patient's own wrist tendon to rebuild the joint after the degenerated bone is removed. During the same surgery, the compressed nerve that caused the carpal tunnel syndrome was released through the same small incision. This innovative method of operating on both problems through a single skin incision was developed at Lenox Hill Hospital.

"It was amazing," commented Ms. Hassett. "The entire surgery took 45 minutes and it completely eliminated my pain. This was the best thing I could ever do for myself."

COMMON HAND AND WRIST PROBLEMS

Carpal Tunnel Syndrome

Carpal tunnel syndrome occurs when the nerve that runs from the wrist to the hand through the carpal tunnel is compressed. The syndrome primarily causes tingling or numbness in the thumb and fingers.

"Patients often assume they have the condition if their hands hurt from overuse," said Dr. Yang. "In reality, carpal tunnel syndrome is a very specific condition — not just aches and pains."

Carpal tunnel syndrome is curable if identified and treated appropriately. If symptoms do not go away with nonoperative treatment, surgery can release the canal that is pinching the nerve.

Tendonitis

DeQuervain's tendonitis can occur at the wrist near the base of the thumb, causing pain, stiffness and weakness. It can most often be eliminated using noninvasive treatments such as splinting and cortisone injection. If the problem persists, surgeons can release the tendon sheath, allowing more room for the tendons to glide without friction.

Osteoarthritis

Pain, swelling and stiffness in the joints of the wrist and hand could indicate the first signs of osteoarthritis — the normal wearing down of the joints with age. Although osteoarthritis is not reversible, treatment can help reduce symptoms. If less invasive therapies such as arthritis medications, bracing, and physical therapy are not successful, physicians can surgically reconstruct or replace the joints.

∴ To learn more about treatment for hand and wrist problems, call 212-744-8114 or visit lenoxhillhospital.org/orthopedics.