Trigger finger: Exercises and advice

You have been diagnosed with trigger finger (or thumb). This leaflet explains what the condition is, outlines treatment options and gives advice and exercises to help you recover.

What is trigger finger?
It is a painful condition in which a finger or thumb clicks when it is bending or straightening; sometimes, it can also lock.

Trigger finger occurs if there is a problem with the tendon or sheath, (the thin layer of tissue surrounding the tendon), such as swelling. This sometimes means the tendon can no longer slide easily through the sheath’s pulley system and it can become bunched up to form a nodule. This makes it harder to bend the affected finger or thumb. The tendon gets caught in the opening of the pulley and the finger can click painfully as it is straightened.

What are tendons?
Tendons are white, fibrous cords that join muscle to bone. They allow the bone to move when the muscle contracts. In the fingers, tendons run along the surface of the bone and are attached to the muscles in the forearm. The tendons are held in place on the bones by a series of ligaments (strong bands of tissue) called pulleys. These are shaped like arches over the tendon, keeping it along the bone. The pulleys combine to form a tunnel, or sheath, along the surface of the bone, through which the tendons slide.

What symptoms does trigger finger cause?
- Clicking of the finger/thumb during movement, or locking in a bent or straight position.
- A nodule (small lump) can be felt at the base of the affected finger.
- Tenderness when you press on the site of nodule.
- Stiffness, especially in trigger thumb, where movement at the end joint is reduced.
How is trigger finger treated?

Trigger finger/thumb is not harmful but can be painful. Some mild cases recover over a few weeks by modifying or avoiding activities that cause the trigger (this will be individual to each person). Other options for treatment are:

- **Steroid injections:** Steroid injections have been found to relieve the pain and triggering in about 70% of cases. 
  
  The risks of injection are small, but it very occasionally causes a temporary increase in pain (steroid flare), bruising, bleeding and infection. Improvement may occur within a few days of injection but may take several weeks. A second injection is sometimes helpful, but surgery may be needed if triggering persists.

- **Surgery:** If non-surgical measures and steroid injection management don’t work then surgery under local anaesthetic may be considered – This would be a day case procedure. An incision is made at the base of the finger and the pulley is released to allow the tendon to move freely. The wound will require a small dressing for 10-14 days. Light use of the hand is possible from the day of surgery and active use of the finger is encouraged to prevent complications.

  Complications from surgery are uncommon but include, pain, bleeding, infection, damage to the surrounding structures and recurrence of triggering.

What exercises should I be doing?

There are no specific exercises that you need to do. As long as you keep your finger moving this will prevent stiffness and loss of hand function. However, if your finger is locked in a bent position and you are unable to straighten it, you should seek urgent medical help.
Further information

- [www.readinghandsurgery.com](http://www.readinghandsurgery.com)
- The British Society for Surgery of the Hand (BSSH) [https://www.bssh.ac.uk/patients/](https://www.bssh.ac.uk/patients/)
- The Royal College of Surgeons of England have some patient information publications available on their website [www.rcseng.ac.uk/patient_information](http://www.rcseng.ac.uk/patient_information)

Contacting us

If you require any information or advice from the Hand Therapy Team, you can contact us at the Royal Berkshire Hospital during office hours Monday to Friday via the Clinical Administration Team (CAT 5): 0118 322 7415.

To find out more about our Trust visit [www.royalberkshire.nhs.uk](http://www.royalberkshire.nhs.uk)

Please ask if you need this information in another language or format.

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