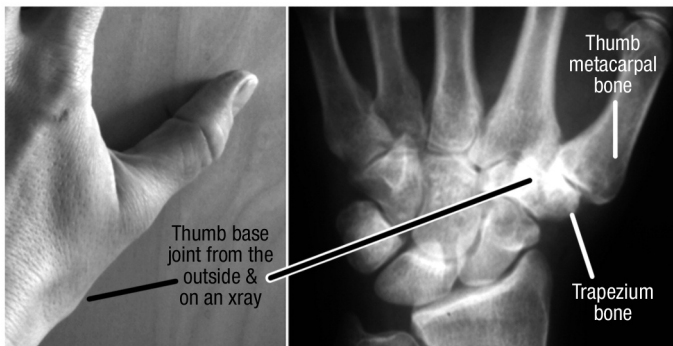




CONDITION

What is Thumb base arthritis?

This is a form of osteoarthritis between the base of the thumb metacarpal and one of the small bones of the wrist, the trapezium.



What is arthritis of the base of the thumb?

This is a form of osteoarthritis between the base of the thumb metacarpal and one of the small bones of the wrist, the trapezium (as shown in the picture). This joint is very specialised allowing a large range of thumb motion which contributes significantly to the dexterity of hand. As a result arthritis in this joint is often functionally very disabling.

What are the symptoms of arthritis of the base of the thumb?

This condition affects women ten times more commonly than men. Symptoms usually start in the middle forties but can occur earlier. Initially intermittent pain is noted after gripping or pinching. This may gradually become more constant over time with associated loss of movement and strength. It becomes hard to turn keys, open jars or turn on taps. In severe cases a bump at the base of the thumb appears and the thumb becomes stiff making it difficult to pick up larger objects.

How is the diagnosis of thumb base arthritis made?

A characteristic story and examination suggest the diagnosis. Xrays confirm the diagnosis. Certain other conditions may need to be excluded.

What treatments are available for thumb base arthritis?

Most patients with this condition do not need surgery but manage with various combinations of painkillers, splints and activity modification.

Local anaesthetic and steroid injections into the joint can dramatically relieve symptoms, sometimes for prolonged periods. The injection doesn't repair the arthritis but does reduce the inflammation within the joint secondary to the arthritis.

Sometimes the joint is more painful for a couple of days after these injections. The beneficial effects of the steroid may take up to a week to become apparent. There is also a small risk of infection with these injections.

For persistent, severe symptoms surgery can be considered. Many operations have been described for this condition. The commonest ones include removing the trapezium alone, removing the trapezium and reconstructing one of the thumb ligaments, replacing the joint and fusing the joint. Each has its pros and cons and surgery must be carefully tailored to the individual. All the operations are associated with a significant period of immobilisation of the thumb (at least 3 weeks) and further rehabilitation thereafter but are good at relieving pain and improving function.