



CONDITION

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Inflammation is the way the body responds to infection or damage. Key features are pain with swelling, redness and warmth. If the inflammation is near the skin then you may feel or see all of those changes. If it occurs deeply buried inside all you may notice is the pain. The process is usually co-ordinated by local chemicals released in the damaged areas which increase the local blood flow (red, swollen and warm). The blood brings with it cells which are part of your natural immune system. The cells help clear up the damage or infection and things gradually settle down as the local chemicals return to normal levels. In tendons the inflammation also affects the tissue surrounding the tendons, when it is present, called synovium. In that case you may hear your healthcare professional mention 'tenosynovitis' – this term covers inflammation of the tendon and the surrounding synovium.

The process of inflammation occasionally doesn't settle down over a normal time course and the inflammation then becomes chronic – ie long lasting. This sort of chronic inflammation can actually cause damage to the local tissues – in this case the tendons.

Which tendons can be affected around the wrist?

There are a great many tendons around the wrist. They can be grouped into tendons that move the wrist and tendons that move the fingers. Of the finger tendons one big group straighten out the fingers (extensors) and one big group bend the fingers (flexors). The wrist movers tend to be affected individually and the finger movers in their groups (extensors or flexors) if they become inflamed.

Why might these tendons become inflamed?

The causes of tendon inflammation are similar to the causes of joint inflammation (arthritis).

1. Mechanical problems can irritate tendons and cause them to become inflamed. This group includes a tendon rubbing in a tight canal or over an extra piece of bone from an arthritic joint. Sometimes the underlying cause is not identified.
2. General inflammatory conditions can also affect the tendons and make them inflamed. This includes conditions such as inflammatory arthritis and gout.

How is the diagnosis made?

Listening carefully to your story and examining you thoroughly will usually suggest which tendons are affected and why.

If the underlying cause could be a general inflammatory condition this is important to note as such conditions are often well treated by tablets and medicines rather than an operation. Blood tests may help to uncover which sort of general inflammatory condition is involved. A review by a Rheumatology specialist may help with this.

Xrays may be of use if mechanical irritation (from an arthritic joint say) is suspected.

A more detailed scan, such as a magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) scan may help to show the extent of the inflammation and damage around and within the tendon.

Occasionally a specimen of the inflammation needs to be sent to the laboratory and examined under the microscope to try and work out what the underlying diagnosis is.

What is the treatment?

Fortunately most cases of tendonitis settle down with simple measures such as rest, ice, activity modification, pain killers and splints. A hand therapist may be called in to help if symptoms don't settle quickly. Specific tablets and medicines might be useful for inflammatory conditions. Steroid injections can sometimes be very useful.

If the tendons remained very swollen and inflamed for a long time they are at risk of rupturing (coming apart). In these cases, or where there is an obvious mechanical cause of the irritation, surgery might be helpful. Your surgeon will advise you further.