SYMPTOM

Wrist pain

Wrist pain is discomfort, aching, or soreness in or around the wrist joint.

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE
Aching, sharp, burning, stiff, or tender

WHERE IT IS FELT
Around the joint between your hand and forearm

MOST COMMON CAUSES
Sprains, tendon irritation, repetitive hand use

WHEN IT IS URGENT
A red, hot, swollen wrist with fever

USUALLY LASTS
Days to months, depending on injury and underlying cause

SEE A DOCTOR IF
Pain persists, returns, or limits normal hand use

Overview

Wrist pain can come from the bones, joints, tendons, ligaments, or nerves around your wrist. Tendons connect muscles to bones. Ligaments are strong bands that connect bones to each other.

The pain may begin suddenly after a fall or awkward movement. It can also develop gradually from repeated hand use, arthritis, or pressure on a nerve. Where the pain is felt and which movements trigger it can help narrow down the possible causes.

Wrist pain is a symptom, not a diagnosis. Many causes improve with simple care, but some injuries and infections need prompt medical attention.

What it may feel or look like

Wrist pain can affect the thumb side, little-finger side, back, palm side, or the whole joint. It may spread into your hand or forearm.

You may notice:

The pattern matters. Pain after a fall may suggest an injury. Pain with repeated thumb

movement can involve irritated tendons. Night-time tingling in the thumb, index, and middle fingers may occur when the median nerve is compressed at the wrist.

- A dull ache, sharp pain, burning, or throbbing
- Tenderness when you press the wrist
- Swelling, bruising, warmth, or stiffness
- Clicking, grinding, or a feeling that the wrist is unstable
- Pain when gripping, twisting, typing, or lifting
- Weakness or difficulty moving your hand
- Tingling or numbness, especially in the fingers

Common causes

Sprains and strains happen when ligaments, muscles, or tendons are stretched or injured. They often follow a fall, sudden twist, heavy lift, or forceful movement.

Tendon irritation can develop after repeated gripping, lifting, sports, or tool use. De Quervain tenosynovitis is irritation of tendons on the thumb side of the wrist. It often hurts when you move the thumb, grasp something, or turn the wrist.

Carpal tunnel syndrome occurs when the median nerve is compressed as it passes through a narrow space in the wrist. It can cause pain, tingling, numbness, or weakness, usually affecting the thumb and nearby fingers.

Arthritis can cause aching, swelling, and stiffness. Osteoarthritis results from changes in the joint's cartilage and is more likely after an old injury. Inflammatory conditions, including rheumatoid arthritis, can affect both wrists and may cause prolonged morning stiffness.

Less common causes include a ganglion cyst, which is a fluid-filled lump near a joint or tendon; gout, caused by crystals forming in a joint; and damage to wrist cartilage.

A broken bone can follow a fall or direct blow. A scaphoid fracture affects a small bone near the base of the thumb. Its swelling may be mild, and it does not always appear on the first X-ray.

Rare but urgent causes include a joint infection or a serious injury affecting blood flow, nerves, or the alignment of the wrist.

When to seek medical care

Seek emergency care after an injury if:

Arrange same-day medical care for a wrist that becomes red, hot, very swollen, and painful, particularly if you have a fever or feel unwell. These signs can occur with an infection or severe inflammation.

You should also get prompt advice after a fall if you cannot use the wrist, swelling is substantial, or there is marked tenderness near the base of the thumb.

Book a routine appointment if pain lasts more than a week or two despite self-care, keeps returning, disturbs sleep, or limits work and daily activities. Make an appointment sooner if numbness, tingling, weakness, or a growing lump develops.

- Your wrist looks bent or out of place
- Bone is visible or there is a deep open wound
- Your hand becomes pale, blue, cold, or severely numb
- You cannot move your fingers, especially after a major injury

How the cause is found

A healthcare professional will ask when the pain began, whether there was an injury, and which movements make it worse. Tell them about swelling, stiffness, clicking, numbness, fever, previous wrist injuries, and any other painful joints.

They may examine both wrists and check movement, grip, tenderness, sensation, and blood flow. Specific movements can help identify an irritated tendon, ligament, or nerve.

An X-ray may be used when a fracture or arthritis is possible. Some fractures are difficult to see immediately, so repeat imaging or a scan may be needed if pain continues. Ultrasound or magnetic resonance imaging, known as MRI, can show tendons, ligaments, cysts, and other soft tissues.

Nerve tests may be used for ongoing numbness or suspected carpal tunnel syndrome. Blood tests are not needed for most wrist pain, but they may help when infection, gout, or inflammatory arthritis is being considered.

Treatment and self-care

Treatment depends on the cause and severity. A fracture, infection, significant ligament injury, or persistent nerve compression needs specific medical care.

For a mild recent strain or sprain, you can:

Do not place ice directly on your skin. Avoid keeping the wrist completely still for long periods unless a clinician has advised it, because prolonged immobilisation can increase stiffness.

Non-prescription pain medicines may help. Follow the product label and ask a pharmacist or clinician which option is suitable if you are pregnant, take blood thinners like warfarin or apixaban , or have kidney disease, liver disease, stomach ulcers, or other medical conditions.

Once pain begins to settle, gradually return to normal activity. Adjusting your grip, tools, keyboard position, or training routine may reduce repeated strain. Exercises, hand therapy, injections, or surgery are considered only when appropriate for the identified cause.

- Reduce activities that clearly trigger pain
- Apply a wrapped cold pack for up to 20 minutes at a time
- Keep the wrist raised if it is swollen
- Continue gentle, comfortable finger and wrist movement
- Use a supportive splint briefly if it improves comfort

What to expect

A mild strain may improve over several days to a few weeks. Tendon problems can take longer, especially if the irritating activity continues. Fractures, arthritis, and nerve conditions have different recovery patterns.

Steady improvement in pain, swelling, movement, and grip is reassuring. Return for assessment if progress stops, symptoms worsen, or numbness and weakness appear.

Some wrist problems can return. Building activity gradually, taking breaks from repetitive tasks, and using comfortable hand positions may help reduce flare-ups.

Common questions

Can wrist pain be carpal tunnel syndrome?

It can be, especially when pain comes with tingling or numbness in the thumb, index, and middle fingers. Other nerve, tendon, and joint conditions can cause similar symptoms, so an examination may be needed.

Can a wrist be broken if I can still move it?

Yes. Some fractures still allow movement and cause only modest swelling. Persistent

tenderness after a fall, particularly near the base of the thumb, should be assessed.

Should I wear a wrist splint?

A splint may provide short-term comfort after a mild injury or during activities that trigger symptoms. The best type and duration depend on the cause. A splint that is too tight can worsen swelling or numbness.

Is clicking in the wrist harmful?

Painless clicking can occur without a serious problem. Clicking accompanied by pain, swelling, weakness, or a feeling of instability is worth discussing at a routine appointment.

Sources

- National Health Service. Wrist pain
- American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons. Wrist sprains
- American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons. Carpal tunnel syndrome
- American Society for Surgery of the Hand. Scaphoid fracture
- Merck Manual Consumer Version. Evaluation of hand disorders