NONSURGICAL ORTHOPEDICS — KEY WEST CONCIERGE ORTHOPEDICS

What Wrist Pain Feels Like: What Does Thumb-Side Pain Mean at Work?

Thumb-side wrist pain that shows up during restaurant work often points to irritated tendons on the thumb side of the wrist. A common cause is De Quervain's stenosing tenosynovitis, a tendon problem in the first dorsal compartment where two thumb tendons pass through a tight tunnel. Gripping, lifting, and twisting usually bring it out more than simple rest does.

Jason Pirozzolo, DO, a sports medicine physician, says that kind of pain usually matters because it changes basic hand use before it stops you completely. "When the sore spot is on the thumb side, the first thought is irritated tendons from repeated hand use," he says. For bartenders and servers, that can make bottles, trays, and turning motions harder before the wrist looks very different.

What is going on in the wrist

The usual problem is irritation in the tendons that move your thumb, not pain spread across the whole wrist. De Quervain's stenosing tenosynovitis means swelling and friction around the abductor pollicis longus and extensor pollicis brevis, two thumb tendons that run together on the radial side, meaning the thumb side, of the wrist. That is why the pain often stays focused near the base of the thumb and the wrist crease.

Restaurant work can keep asking for the same motions again and again, especially gripping, lifting, and twisting. "People notice when normal hand and wrist activities start to feel painful, weak, or tight on the thumb side," Dr. Pirozzolo says. In a busy spot like a Duval Street bar, those repeated turns and lifts can keep the area irritated longer if you do not protect it early.

The wrist problems this work causes most

For this kind of work, the common trouble is not every kind of wrist pain. The pattern most tied to repeated gripping and twisting is De Quervain's, which centers on the thumb side and tends to flare with carrying, pouring, and turning. A more general wrist strain can also happen, but that soreness is often broader and less tied to the base of the thumb.

The injury you probably have is the thumb-side tendon problem if the sore point is narrow and the pain rises with grip and rotation. That does not prove the diagnosis by itself, but it is the pattern Dr. Pirozzolo watches for first. "Where the pain sits and which hand motion tweaks it usually tells a lot," he says.

What to do this week at home

The first goal is to calm the irritated area and stop feeding it with the same motion. Initial

care for suspected De Quervain's can start with splinting and a nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory medicine, and protection during demanding work helps lower the chance of getting hurt again. That makes early support and lighter use reasonable while you watch whether the pain settles.

1. Use a wrist and thumb splint through the day for the next several days, especially during heavier hand use.
2. Take a nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory medicine as directed on the label for a few days, unless a clinician has told you not to use it.
3. Cut back on repeated gripping, lifting, and twisting for this week, and keep doing that until the sore spot is no longer flaring during routine tasks.
4. Protect the wrist during demanding work duties until the pain is clearly easing, rather than testing it shift after shift.
5. Have it checked if the pain is not improving after a few days of protection and lighter use.

Mistakes that keep it going

The most common mistake is trying to work through a very specific sore spot because the hand still seems usable. That often keeps the same tendons rubbing in the same tight space. Another mistake is dropping the splint too soon and going straight back to heavier use once the pain dips for a day or two.

Rehab matters after the protection phase too. Once a wrist splint is removed, physiotherapy is described as a key part of how well function returns after rehabilitation. "The answer is not to nurse it forever, but not to jump back to the same work load either," Dr. Pirozzolo says.

Dr. Pirozzolo puts it simply: "Thumb-side wrist pain from repeated hand movements is often treatable, but when you protect it early it can feel better sooner." Your next step is to back off the repeated twisting and gripping now, and get it checked soon if the pain is still limiting your shift after a few days.

If thumb-side wrist pain is still limiting your shift after a few days of protection, you want it checked soon, contact **Key West Concierge Orthopedics**.

Questions About Wrist and Thumb Pain

Does thumb-side wrist pain always mean De Quervain's?

No. It is one common cause of radial-side wrist and thumb pain, but the exact cause depends on where the pain sits and which motions bring it on.

Should you stop using your hand completely?

Usually the goal is protection, not total rest. Lighter use and avoiding the motions that keep setting it off are often more realistic than stopping all hand use.

What if the splint helps, but the pain comes back at work?

That often means the wrist still needs protection during heavier duties or a slower return

to full use. It is worth getting checked if the same work keeps bringing it right back.

Sources

- Upper Limb Pain chapter (textbook-style reference), supplied excerpt 5899.
- Wrist and Hand Injuries chapter (rehabilitation text), supplied excerpt 4006.

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