

Family Medicine Clerkship Plain Language Summary

Title: Wrist ganglion cyst: What is it, and what can I do about it?

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Plain Language Summary:



What is a ganglion cyst?

A ganglion cyst is a pocket of thick, mucous-like fluid that is found near a joint space, usually the wrist or ankle. Women tend to get them more than men, but it is unclear what causes them. The cysts press against nerves and other tissue, so they can cause pain, stiffness, or weakness.

Is it cancer?

Your doctor can do two easy tests in the office to make sure you have a ganglion cyst and not cancer. First, they can turn off the lights in the room and then shine a flashlight on the lump in your wrist. If the lump transilluminates, or glows red, the mass is likely made up of fluid rather than denser, cancerous cells. Another way to confirm it is a ganglion cyst is to do an ultrasound where a probe is placed on the lump to look for at the density of fluid. A ganglion cyst never becomes cancerous.

How can I get rid of it?

There are a couple different options in the treatment of ganglion cysts. All three options have been shown to equally decrease symptoms of pain, weakness, stiffness, and appearance equally. It is up to you to think about the risks and benefits of each option.

The first option is to do nothing. A little more than 40% of ganglion cysts will go away on their own. Rest will help the cyst to decrease in size whereas overuse may cause it to get bigger. If you choose this option, you will not have the risks of a procedure including scar, infection, and possible damage to nerves and muscles.

Another option is for aspiration, or removal of fluid through a needle. This can often be done in your regular doctor's office. Some numbing medication will be put in your skin by a very small needle to that you don't feel the actual procedure. Then, the doctor will use a larger needle to pull out the fluid inside the cyst. This procedure will still leave the

covering of the cyst – like a balloon without air – inside the skin, so there is a risk that the cyst could return. This has the risk of infection and bleeding.

Excision, or cutting the cyst out, is a third option. For this option, you will have to go to an operating room. Depending on your surgeon, you will have local anesthesia, which is numbing medicine around the site of your cyst, or general anesthesia, which is when you are put to sleep for the procedure. The doctors will make a cut through your skin and remove the cyst with the covering. Because the covering is removed too, there is a better chance that your cyst will not come back. However, there is the risk of scar, bleeding, and damage to nerves, muscles, and blood vessels, which can result in weakness and pain.

Where can I go for more information?

American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons: Ganglion (Cyst) of the Wrist
<http://orthoinfo.aaos.org/topic.cfm?topic=a00006>

Interactive video from the National Library of Medicine on Ganglion Cysts
<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/tutorials/ganglioncysts/htm/video.htm>

EMedicineHealth: Ganglion Cysts
http://www.emedicinehealth.com/ganglion_cyst/article_em.htm

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Ultrasound
Wrist Pain

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