



Occupational Health
Clinics for Ontario
Workers Inc.

Centres de santé
des travailleurs (ses)
de l'Ontario Inc.

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Carpal Tunnel Syndrome in the Workplace

Do you have numbness in your thumb, index, and/or middle fingers and have problems sleeping at night because of it? Given the technological advances, we are often faced with using computers as a medium to communicate. Administrative staff amongst other professions could be at risk for Carpal Tunnel Syndrome (CTS). Symptoms may first appear during sleep as we tend to bend our wrist, which in turn compresses the carpal tunnel; however, symptoms may not surface right away.

CTS is a disorder that is characterized by tingling and pain in the hand and fingers due to damage to the median nerve. The pain may radiate up the arm as far as the elbow, although not usually into the elbow itself. Evidence has shown that the little finger is unaffected. This could be key to your diagnosis; if you awaken with your hand asleep, pinch your little finger to see if it is numb also. Be sure to tell your doctor your findings. Other complaints include numbness while the hand is in a gripping motion, such as driving.

There are a number of risk factors that contribute to the development of CTS including: awkward postures, force, repetition, and vibration exposure. In administrative staff, a higher risk is posed against staff that perform repetitive tasks. Safe limits of repetition depend on frequency, speed and duration. A highly repetitive movement is considered one in which more than 50% of the shift is spent completing that movement, whereas a low repetitive movement is one in which less than 50% of the shift is spent completing that task.

There are also several non-work related risk factors that can contribute to the development of CTS such as obesity, hypothyroidism, pregnancy, alcohol and smoking, age, and diabetes.

How do doctors identify the condition? Your doctor will start by obtaining a history of the problem, followed by a physical examination (including Phanel's and Tinel's tests). The description of the symptoms (from the patient) and the physical examination are important in the diagnosis of CTS. If your symptoms started after a traumatic injury, x-rays may be needed to check for a fractured bone. Blood work is taken to rule out any pre-existing conditions. Several tests are available to see how well the median nerve is functioning, including the nerve conduction velocity test (NCV) test. This test measures how fast nerve impulses move through the nerve.

Sheila Patterson is an Administrative Assistant with the Occupational Health Clinics for Ontario Workers Inc. For additional resources, please visit us on our website (www.ohcow.on.ca/clinics/sudbury) or call (705) 523-2330.