

CUBITAL TUNNEL RELEASE

The **ulnar nerve** provides sensation to the little and ring fingers and activates many of the small muscles in the hand. The nerve passes behind the elbow where it can be felt and is referred to as the “funny bone”. At the elbow, it runs through a tight tunnel (cubital tunnel).

In some people, this tunnel is too tight for the nerve. Mild pressure causes occasional "pins and needles". Severe pressure causes the fingers to become numb and the muscles of the hand waste away which causes weakness and difficulty in straightening the fingers.

The nerve gradually withers if the condition is not treated. This causes permanent loss of sensation and wasting of hand muscles which cannot be relieved by surgery.

Correction of this problem involves cutting the roof of this tunnel to relieve the pressure within the tunnel. Occasionally, when there is arthritis or scarring in the area, some bone needs to be trimmed and/or the nerve has to be moved forwards.

The operation is usually performed under general anaesthetic. Local anaesthetic is injected around the cut at the end of the operation. Therefore this area and possibly some of the fingers will remain numb for up to ten hours after surgery. As this effect wears off, it may be worth taking some pain killers.

Hand movement should be continued and you should perform normal light activities after the operation.

You will be discharged with a bulky dressing, consisting of wool and a crepe bandage over a light adherent dressing. The top dressing can be removed the day after surgery but leave the adherent dressing in place to protect the wound for five days or so. Once all dressings are removed, it is safe to get the hand wet in a bath or shower. There obviously will be some swelling and bruising. Look out for any redness or tenderness in the area around the wound that might indicate an infection. Do not apply antiseptic but please contact my secretary if you have any worries.

You should try to move the elbow normally. You can drive a car after 1 week as long as you are comfortable. Timing of your return to work is variable according to your occupation and you should discuss this. Possible complications include: -

Wound Possible problems include swelling, bruising, bleeding, blood collection under the wound (haematoma), infection and splitting of the wound (dehiscence).

Scar You will have a scar on the inside of the elbow, which will be firm to touch and tender for some months. This can be helped by firm massage with the moisturizing cream.

Neuroma A small nerve running in the region can be damaged during the surgery and form a painful spot in the scar (neuroma). This complication is very rare but may require a further operation to correct.

Regional pain syndrome About 5% (1 in 20) of people are sensitive to hand surgery and their hand may become swollen, painful and stiff after the operation. This problem cannot be predicted, is variable in severity and is principally treated with physiotherapy.

Outcome Improvement after surgery can be modest, particularly in patients who have more severe compression. Muscles that have wasted rarely recover. Recovery of feeling is slow and often incomplete. The operation is mainly intended to prevent further deterioration.

