

Pain Insights

Courtesy of Joe De Santi, M.D.

WRIST PAIN

Wrist pain may present in a variety of situations and is attributable to the unique anatomy of the wrist. The wrist is actually a joint of many joints. The multiple carpal bones of the hand articulate with each other, the distal radius and the head of ulna. These two bones, in turn, articulate with one another creating the distal radioulnar joint. With all these articulating surfaces, it is possible to develop discomfort that is difficult to isolate. Many times chronic inflammatory illnesses affect multiple joints in this area and result in diffuse swelling of the joints themselves, or the lining known as the synovium. The result is usually the same, a mildly swollen, warm and tender wrist joint with pain on movement.

Most of us have experienced a fall in our lives and usually injure our finger, hand or wrist as a result. Since it is natural to extend the hand in an attempt to cushion the impact as we fall, the wrist is usually injured. Sprains are common as are contusions or bruising of the bones. In most instances, a short period of immobilization, icing and anti-inflammatory medication is all that is needed. However, occasionally the fall can be associated with a fracture of the small bones in the base of the hand or the radius, the ulna or both. In these instances it may be necessary to cast the wrist or undergo surgical repair. Wrist fractures tend to occur more commonly in certain sports like skating, skateboarding and snowboarding since falls to the hand occur at higher speeds. Elderly adults may also sustain fractures due to loss of mineralization of the bone with illness, age or medications. Fractures in an otherwise young healthy adult should raise suspicion if they occur unexpectedly after a small fall.

A discussion of pain in a joint wouldn't be complete if we didn't discuss the systemic illness of rheumatoid arthritis, psoriasis and gout. These relatively common disorders are associated with inflammation of multiple joints, including the wrist. Gout tends to favor joints far from the core of the body, like the great toe, since temperatures are cooler and favor crystal formation. This is what leads to the inflammation and exquisite arthritic pain of gout. Psoriasis of the skin can lead to inflammation in the joints, and like rheumatoid arthritis, is believed to involve some form of auto-immune process where the body is attacking itself. Management with biologic agents (usually by intravenous or intramuscular injection) for psoriasis and rheumatoid arthritis is often very helpful. Gout can be well managed with dietary change to avoid triggers and medication to lower uric acid levels in the blood.