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What to expect after your carpal tunnel release

Although nighttime symptoms are often relieved immediately, other symptoms, such as constant numbness, weakness or clumsiness are due to nerve damage. These will resolve very gradually, and recovery may be incomplete. It is important that starting the day after surgery, you begin the finger exercises (one, seven, claw, fist) four to six times per day so your fingers don't get stiff. It is normal for the mid-base of the palm to be most tender and most sensitive to the touch during the interval of time from two to six weeks following surgery. You may have tenderness of your incision for 8-12 weeks.

Gentle exercise and light use of the hand is encouraged beginning the day after surgery. On post-op day five, you may remove your dressing, start showering but not bathing, and keep the wound covered with clean gauze until you return to the office at 10-14 days, when stitches will be removed.

In general, patients can return to work as soon as they feel comfortable doing so. Patients who perform office work often return as soon as a few days up to a week. Those in light labor positions at 2-4 weeks and heavier labor typically 6 weeks. The limiting factor will often be pain in the palm with heavy grip and avoidance of direct impact to the palm.

Patients planning to return immediately to strenuous activities may do so in a custom-made strong splint. This is worn for one month. Golf and hand-related sports are usually too uncomfortable until six to eight weeks post-op.

The effects of scar tissue shrinking and maturing can pull on the median nerve and often result in brief shooting or electrical pains with motion, particularly when you stretch your hand out to reach an item at arm's length. Sudden shooting or electrical shock pains may also occur spontaneously while you are doing nothing. Both of these are normal occurrences and improve with time.

The shrinking and swelling associated with scar maturation results in the feeling of a lump at the base of the palm and the incision. This is most noticeable when you lean on the hand while going from a sitting to standing position. This is normal and improves with time and with massage.

Grip strength is normally reduced following surgery, but will return to pre-operative level by approximately two months and improve from there depending on severity of nerve damage.

You are clear to resume light activities within your own tolerance, including driving, as soon as you feel comfortable enough to do so and are off of narcotic pain medicine. You are encouraged to use common sense and avoid activities which hurt.