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Ganglion Cysts

A ganglion cyst is a firm, fluid-filled lump that can appear suddenly. Most often they appear on the front or back of the wrist or at the base of a finger. It can occur anywhere on the hand near a joint. These cysts grow from normal tissue in the wrist and fingers and range in size from a pea to a peach pit. Although ganglion cysts are common, they don't spread and they don't become cancerous. They can occur after an injury, but many times it isn't known why they grow. Ganglion cysts can change in size and may go away on their own.

The hand and wrist are made up of many small bones that meet at joints. Tendons allow the joints to bend and straighten. Both tendons and joints are lined with a thick tissue called synovium. This tissue produces a thick fluid that keeps the joints and tendons moving easily. Sometimes the tissue balloons out from the joint or tendons and forms a cyst. As the cyst fills with fluid and grows, it appears as a lump you can feel.

The fluid-filled sac can put pressure on the nerves that pass through the joint, making the ganglion cyst become painful. The doctor can make a diagnosis by close examination of the lump, or sometimes a small amount of fluid may be drawn out of the lump, or an x-ray may be ordered to rule out other problems.

Treatment options:

Observation: If the ganglion is not painful or bothersome, the physician may recommend just watching the cyst.

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Aspiration: You may choose to have the doctor drain the fluid from the cyst. The area is numbed and the cyst is punctured with a needle to remove the fluid. The aspiration treatment leaves the outer shell and the stalk of the ganglion intact, so it may reform and reappear. The treatment with the most reliable results is often surgical excision of the cyst.

Surgery: This is done on an outpatient basis. Depending on the area involved, this will be accomplished with a local, regional or general anesthetic. An incision is made over the area of swelling. The ganglion cyst shell, fluid, and stalk are removed. After surgery, the area is covered with a sterile bulky dressing, the area may become swollen and tender. The incision must remain covered and dry for ten to fourteen days from the date of surgery. At that time, you will come back into the office for removal of the stitches. The usual recovery time needed after surgery is two to six weeks depending on the area involved.