

## Surgery for De Quervain's Disease

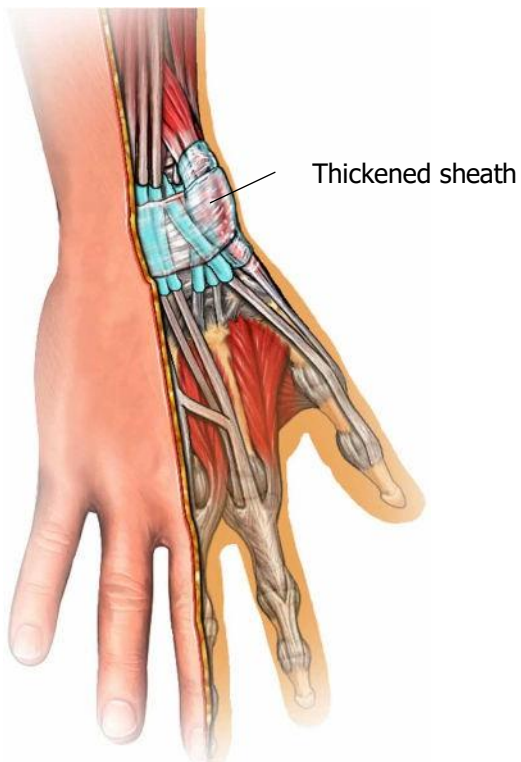
### What is De Quervain's Disease?

De Quervain's disease is a condition that causes pain when moving the wrist and thumb, often accompanied by tenderness and swelling at the base of the thumb.

Your surgeon has recommended surgery as a potential treatment for de Quervain's disease. However, the decision to proceed with the operation is entirely yours.

This document provides essential information about the benefits and risks of the procedure to help you make an informed decision. If you have any unanswered questions, it is important to discuss them with your surgeon or the healthcare team.

Once all your concerns have been addressed and you feel ready to proceed, you will be asked to sign the informed consent form. This marks the final step in the decision-making process. However, you may change your mind at any time before the procedure.



## How Does De Quervain's Disease Occur?

Two tendons responsible for thumb movement normally glide smoothly through a tight sheath at the base of the thumb. If the fibrous covering of this sheath thickens, it restricts tendon movement, causing pain, particularly when extending the thumb. Some individuals may experience stiffness in the wrist and thumb or a slight locking sensation when moving the thumb.

It can sometimes be challenging to distinguish the pain caused by **de Quervain's disease** from pain due to **osteoarthritis** of the wrist or thumb. Your surgeon will assess your condition and discuss the diagnosis with you.

De Quervain's disease is more commonly seen in:

- Women who have recently given birth
- Individuals who have experienced wrist trauma or fractures
- People with medical conditions such as **diabetes** or **thyroid disorders**
- Those engaged in repetitive wrist and thumb movements

However, in most cases, no specific cause can be identified.

## What Are the Benefits of Surgery?

The primary goal of surgery is to relieve pain at the base of the thumb.

## Are There Alternatives to Surgery?

For mild symptoms, the following non-surgical options may help:

- **Resting the wrist and thumb**
- **Wearing a splint at night** to restrict movement
- **Physiotherapy** to improve mobility
- **Anti-inflammatory medications** such as ibuprofen

### Steroid Injections:

A corticosteroid injection into the base of the thumb is effective in about **8 out of 10 cases**, although multiple injections may be needed.

Possible side effects of steroid injections include:

- **Skin Discolouration** – More noticeable in darker skin tones but usually fades over time.
- **Fat Layer Wasting** – The fat under the skin may thin out, especially in individuals with slender wrists, but this effect typically improves.
- **Reduced Effectiveness** – Injections may be less effective if there is a noticeable thickening of the tissue.

## What Happens If I Choose Not to Have Surgery?

If an underlying cause is identified and treated, symptoms may improve. However, in most cases, symptoms **persist** without intervention.

## What Does the Surgery Involve?

Before coming to the hospital, **remove any rings from your affected hand.**

The healthcare team will verify your identity and confirm the procedure details to ensure the correct surgery is performed on the correct thumb. You can assist by confirming these details with your surgeon and the team.

The surgery is typically performed **under local anaesthetic** and takes about **30 minutes**.

During the procedure:

- A **tourniquet** (tight strap) may be applied to reduce bleeding and improve visibility of important structures such as **nerves and tendons**.
- A **small incision** is made at the base of the thumb.
- The **fibrous covering of the sheath** is released to allow the tendons to move freely.
- The incision is **closed with dissolvable stitches**.

## Medication Considerations

Inform your healthcare team about all medications you take, including **blood thinners, herbal remedies, dietary supplements, and over-the-counter medications**. Follow their guidance regarding any necessary adjustments before surgery.

## How Can I Prepare for Surgery?

- **Quit Smoking** – Stopping smoking reduces the risk of complications and supports long-term health.
- **Maintain a Healthy Weight** – Excess weight increases the risk of complications.
- **Exercise Regularly** – Physical activity can aid recovery, but consult your healthcare provider before starting any new routine.
- **Reduce Infection Risk** – Take a bath or shower on the day before or the day of surgery to help prevent infection.

## Possible Complications

The healthcare team takes precautions to minimize risks, but complications can still occur. Risk factors such as **age, smoking, obesity, and underlying conditions like diabetes or heart disease** may increase the likelihood of complications.

Your **anaesthetist** will discuss the potential risks associated with anaesthesia.

### *General Surgical Risks:*

- **Pain** – While surgery aims to relieve pain, some individuals may continue to experience discomfort, particularly if the tendons are not fully released or if pain is due to osteoarthritis.
- **Bleeding** – Any bleeding is usually minor and improves if you keep your hand elevated. Rarely, further intervention may be needed.
- **Scarring** – The scar usually fades over time, though in darker skin tones, it may remain thick and red.
- **Infection** – Keep the wound clean and dry. Contact your healthcare team if you experience fever, redness, swelling, pain, or pus formation. Most infections respond to antibiotics, but further treatment may sometimes be needed.
- **Allergic Reactions** – If you have known allergies, inform your doctor in advance. The healthcare team is trained to manage allergic reactions.

### *Specific Risks of Surgery:*

- **Nerve Damage – Numbness at the back of the thumb** may occur if a nerve is affected. This is usually not a serious issue, as sensation in the front and tip of the thumb remains intact.
- **Scar Sensitivity** – Tenderness at the scar site is common for up to six weeks. In rare cases (**less than 5 in 100 people**), nerve damage beneath the scar may cause long-term discomfort, including a **shooting pain up the arm** when the scar is pressed.
- **Tendon Subluxation** – The thumb tendons may move out of place, requiring additional surgery.
- **Complex Regional Pain Syndrome (CRPS)** – A rare condition that may cause **severe pain, stiffness, and loss of hand function**. Recovery may take months or years, and in some cases, stiffness may be permanent. Taking a **vitamin C supplement for six weeks post-surgery** may help reduce this risk—consult your doctor for guidance.
- **Aching and Stiffness (Risk: 2 in 10)** – Symptoms may persist for a few weeks after surgery.

## Recovery Timeline

### *In Hospital:*

After surgery, you will be monitored in the recovery area before being discharged.

- You will have a **bandage on your hand** and may need to wear a sling.
- Most patients **go home the same day**, but in some cases, a longer stay may be recommended.
- If you have any concerns, contact your healthcare team for guidance.

### *Returning to Normal Activities:*

If you had sedation or general anaesthesia and are discharged on the same day:

- Arrange for a **responsible adult** to drive you home and stay with you for at least **24 hours**.
- Avoid driving, operating machinery, signing legal documents, or drinking alcohol for at least **24 hours**.

### Post-Surgical Care:

- **Keep your hand elevated and bandaged for two days.**
- **Exercise your fingers, elbow, and shoulder** to prevent stiffness.
- **After two days, reduce the dressing size**, but keep the wound clean and dry until the stitches dissolve.
- **Gradual Activity Resumption:** Engage in light activities but avoid heavy lifting until cleared by your surgeon.

## Long-Term Outlook

For **8 in 10 individuals**, symptoms **resolve quickly**, but mild aching or stiffness may persist for several weeks.

## Summary

De Quervain's disease causes pain and swelling at the base of the thumb, affecting wrist and thumb movement. If non-surgical treatments, such as **steroid injections**, do not provide relief, **surgery can help alleviate pain**.

While surgery is generally safe and effective, complications may occur. Understanding these risks will help you make an informed decision and identify potential issues early.

Keep this document for reference and discuss any concerns with your healthcare team. Some risk statistics are derived from global studies and databases. Consult your surgeon for **personalized advice** and possible alternative treatments.

**Note:** This document is for informational purposes only and does not replace professional medical advice.

---

Professor M. A. Imam  
MD, D.SportMed, PhD, FRCS (Tr and Orth)  
Subspecialist in Upper limb and Complex trauma reconstruction  
Tel: 020 3384 5588  
[info@thearmdoc.co.uk](mailto:info@thearmdoc.co.uk)  
[www.thearmdoc.co.uk](http://www.thearmdoc.co.uk)