

Post-operative rehabilitation protocol

Carpal tunnel decompression

Release of the ligament over the median nerve at the wrist. For patients, hand therapists, and GPs.

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The plan at a glance

The operation takes pressure off the nerve. The fingers move from day one. The palm needs time before heavy grip.

	Phase 1 Weeks 0 to 2	Phase 2 Weeks 2 to 6	Phase 3 After 6 weeks
Dressing	Bulky dressing for 2 to 3 days, then a light dressing	None	None
Movement	Full finger, thumb, and wrist movement	Full, with tendon gliding	Full
Load	A cup of tea. No heavy grip	Light grip, up to 2 kg	Progressive grip strengthening
Review	Wound check and stitches out at 10 to 14 days	Hand therapy if stiff or tender	Discharge

Darker shading means tighter restriction. Times are guides. Your surgeon's instructions take precedence where they differ.

Seek advice urgently if

- The wound becomes red, hot, or swollen, or it leaks or opens.
- You have a fever or feel unwell.
- Pain or swelling increases sharply after the first few days.
- Numbness becomes worse than before surgery, or the thumb becomes weak.
- The dressing, splint, or cast feels too tight, or the fingers become cold, pale, blue, or very swollen.

Call 999 or go to the Emergency Department for shortness of breath or chest pain.

For anything else on this list, contact your surgical team the same day. Out of hours, call NHS 111.

Phase 1

Protect: weeks 0 to 2

Aims: control swelling, keep the fingers moving, let the wound heal.

Do

- Keep the hand raised above the heart for the first 48 to 72 hours.
- Make a full fist and straighten the fingers fully, ten times every hour.
- Move the thumb, wrist, elbow, and shoulder through full range.
- Reduce the bulky dressing to a light dressing at two to three days.
- Use the hand for light tasks: eating, dressing, typing.
- Keep the wound dry until the stitches are out.
- Take pain relief regularly as prescribed.

Avoid

- Heavy gripping or lifting.
- Pressure on the palm: pushing up from a chair, using a walking stick in that hand.
- Soaking the wound.
- Dirty or wet work.

Expected in this phase

Night-time tingling often settles within days. Numbness that was constant before surgery recovers slowly, over months. In long-standing cases it may not recover fully.

Phase 2

Recover: weeks 2 to 6

Aims: soften the scar, restore full movement, build light grip.

Do

- Massage the scar firmly with plain moisturiser, several times a day, once the wound has healed.
- Rub and tap a tender scar with different textures to desensitise it.
- Continue full fist and tendon gliding exercises.
- Stretch the wrist gently in both directions.
- Start grip work with soft putty from week four.
- Return to light work.

Avoid

- Lifting more than 2 kg.
- Heavy or repetitive gripping.
- Vibrating tools.
- Body weight through the palm: press-ups, cycling.

Move on to Phase 3 when

The wound has healed, the scar tolerates pressure, and you can make a full fist.

Phase 3

Strengthen: after 6 weeks

Aims: full grip, full work, no restrictions.

- Build grip and pinch strength with firmer putty or a gripper.
- Take weight through the palm in stages.
- Return to heavy manual work at six to eight weeks.

What to expect

Tenderness either side of the scar (pillar pain) is common. It settles over three to six months. Grip strength returns by about three months.

Return to activity

Typical times from surgery. Each depends on comfort, movement, and healing.

Activity	From	Condition
Light typing and desk work	A few days	As comfort allows
Driving	1 to 2 weeks	Able to grip the wheel firmly without pain. Tell your insurer.
Swimming	2 to 3 weeks	Wound fully healed
Light manual work	4 weeks	Scar comfortable
Gym, golf, racket sports	6 weeks	Comfortable grip
Cycling	6 weeks	Palm tolerates pressure
Heavy manual work	6 to 8 weeks	Good grip strength
Contact sport	6 to 8 weeks	Wound and scar settled

When to slow the protocol

Some patients need more time. Your surgeon will tell you if any of these apply.

- **Severe or long-standing compression.** Where the muscle at the base of the thumb has wasted, feeling and strength recover over 12 to 18 months and may stay incomplete.
- **Revision surgery.** A wrist splint is worn for two weeks. Each phase runs two weeks later.
- **Both hands.** The second side is usually done once the first can manage daily tasks, at about six weeks.
- **Smoking and diabetes.** Both slow healing. Stop smoking and vaping nicotine. Keep blood sugar well controlled.

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This protocol is general guidance for uncomplicated open carpal tunnel decompression. It is not a substitute for individual medical advice. Instructions from your own surgeon and therapist take precedence.

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