CQ HAND + UPPER LIMB
SPECIALIST ORTHOPAEDIC SURGEON

PATIENT INFORMATION

Carpal Boss

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What you're feeling

A carpal boss is a firm, bony lump on the back of your hand, at the base of the bone that leads up to your middle or index finger. It sits close to where the small wrist bones meet the long bones of your hand. The lump does not move. It can be tender to press, and it shows up more clearly when you bend your wrist forward.

The lump itself is not always painful. Some people never notice it. Others feel a deep ache in the same spot, often after heavy use of the hand. Loading the wrist with the hand bent back, such as pushing yourself up from a chair or doing gym work on your palms, puts strain on that joint and can stir up the pain. Repeated impact through the knuckles can do the same. The ache may settle with rest, then return the next time you load the hand.

When it flares, everyday tasks can get hard. Pressing down on a bench top, gripping a heavy pan by its handle, or leaning on your hand to rise from a low seat can all hurt right at the lump. The area can also rub on the tendons that run over the back of your hand, which may cause irritation. In some people the joint under the lump develops wear-and-tear arthritis, and in a small number of wrists this is where the pain comes from.

A carpal boss can be mistaken for a ganglion, a fluid-filled lump that is common on the back of the wrist. Getting the right diagnosis matters, because the treatments differ.

If your symptoms are not settling, are getting worse over weeks, wake you at night, or stop you working or using your hand, see your GP or ask for a specialist review.

What's actually happening

The lump is made of bone. It forms where one of your small wrist bones meets the base of a long hand bone, usually under your index or middle finger. Those two bones are joined tightly together, and this part of the wrist barely moves compared with the joints further along.

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The joint surfaces here vary a lot from person to person. Some wrists have an extra small bone in this area, which may make the spot more prone to trouble. Repeated strain or a direct knock to the back of the wrist can then irritate the joint, and the body responds by laying down extra bone. That extra bone is the boss you can feel.

The pain comes from a few possible sources. The lump itself is tender to press. Loading the wrist with the hand bent back squeezes the joint under it. The tendons that glide over the back of your hand can catch on the lump as you move, which irritates them. In about 30% of cases a small ganglion, a fluid-filled sac, sits alongside the boss. And in some wrists the joint under the lump develops wear-and-tear arthritis, which becomes its own source of pain.

The tendons rubbing over the lump matter more than they might sound. If the irritation goes on long enough, a tendon can wear through and rupture, leaving a finger unable to straighten on its own. This is uncommon, but it is one reason a carpal boss with tendon symptoms should not simply be ignored.

This is also why the diagnosis matters. A ganglion filled with fluid and a boss made of bone need different treatment, and pain in this part of the wrist can come from the joint alone, without any lump at all. Getting the true cause right means the treatment aims at the right target.

What we can do about it

Dr Kieran Hirpara, an upper-limb surgeon at Mater Private Hospital Rockhampton, starts with the least invasive options that suit your condition. Patients are generally referred to our clinic by their GP; if a physiotherapist has suggested you see us, you will still need a referral from your GP in order to be eligible for the Medicare rebate. A clinic assessment, which includes your history, an examination and imaging where needed, establishes the diagnosis. For a long-standing problem like this we usually try non-operative care first and consider surgery when that has not given enough improvement.

The first step is giving the joint a rest from whatever keeps stirring it up. That might mean changing how you load your hand, so you are not repeatedly pushing down on it with the wrist bent back. A splint can hold the wrist still and let the irritated joint settle. Hand therapy aims to settle the pain and keep your hand working while the inflammation calms down. Anti-inflammatory tablets can ease the pain during a flare. Give these measures a fair go before thinking about anything further, because every effort should be made to treat a carpal boss without surgery.

If rest, splinting and tablets have not given lasting relief, an injection of cortisone, a strong anti-inflammatory medicine, can be guided by ultrasound so it goes to the right spot. We use it to settle the inflammation around the lump and the joint beneath it.

Surgery comes into the picture when the pain has been there a long time, interferes with your daily activities, and non-operative treatment has not provided lasting relief. It may also be considered when the lump is irritating the tendons on the back of your hand, to protect them from wearing through. The operation removes the bony lump. In some cases the joint itself is also stiffened so the pain is less likely to come back. We will talk through what surgery involves and whether it suits your hand, and the decision is one you make together with

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us. It is important to know that symptoms can persist after surgery, and we will discuss this with you before any decision is made.

What to expect

A carpal boss often behaves like a long-term condition rather than a one-off injury. The lump itself stays. The ache tends to come and go, flaring after heavy use of the hand and settling with rest. Some people are never bothered by it. For others it becomes a persistent problem that interferes with daily activities, and that is usually when treatment is worth pursuing.

Without treatment, the outlook varies. Rest, a splint and anti-inflammatory tablets settle things for some people, but relief may not last. If the lump keeps rubbing on the tendons over the back of your hand, the irritation can build over time, and in a small number of wrists a tendon can eventually wear through. That is why a boss with tendon symptoms should not simply be left alone.

When non-operative care has not given lasting relief, surgery can help, but it is not a guaranteed fix. Removing the bony lump brings a clear improvement in pain and hand function by three months for many people. Stiffening the joint at the same time may make recurrence of pain less likely, though experience with that approach is still limited. It is also true that results from surgery for a symptomatic carpal boss can be unpredictable, and some people continue to have symptoms afterwards. We will talk this through with you before any decision is made.

When to see someone

Most carpal bosses are not urgent. But a few warning signs need faster attention.

Go to an emergency department the same day if a finger or your hand becomes hot, red, swollen and painful, especially with a fever. Also go if your fingers or hand turn pale, cold, white or blue, or if you suddenly lose feeling or movement in the hand after an injury.

See your GP or ask for a specialist review if the pain is not settling, is getting worse over weeks, wakes you at night, or stops you working or using your hand.

Ask for a review sooner if you notice a finger that will not straighten on its own. That can mean a tendon has worn through, which is a reason not to keep waiting.

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