

Trapezectomy

This is an operation performed about 10 times a year. It is performed for arthritis at the base of the thumb. It can be carried out as a day case or occasionally an overnight stay is required. It is usually performed under general anaesthetic, but can be performed under a regional block.

A regional block involves an injection in the armpit or in the base of the neck/shoulder region. This will make the arm numb for 12 to 36 hours.

The operation itself takes about 45 min to carry out. I use a short 2 cm incision on the palm side of the hand at the base of the thumb. This is shown in the figure.

At the end of the operation I use a dissolving stitch and the ends of the suture are trimmed at 2 weeks. The wound is dressed with Steristrips and a sticky dressing and then covered with wool and crêpe with a thin layer of plaster of Paris around the thumb to hold it in the optimal position.

Following the surgery I ask patients to keep the hand elevated for 24 to 48 hours. It is possible to use the fingers but the thumb is not readily available for use.

This dressing stays on for 2 weeks. During this time it is not really possible to use the hand for very much at all. Effectively the hand works as a paddle against which the other hand works normally.

At 2 weeks I reviewed the wound in the clinic taking the dressings down. We arrange for a thermoplastic splint to be made by the hand therapist. This is done so that the thumb and index finger can touch. The splint is removable and has Velcro straps.

The splinting remains for about 4 weeks. During this time patients use the hand increasingly normally. It is not really safe to drive during this time. The fingers can be used for carrying and dressing and it is possible to use this hand for cutlery at this stage. The hand starts to function more normally from about 8 weeks and usually patients have symptom relief such that the hand is better than it was prior to the surgery from 8 to 12 weeks post surgery.

The operation works well in 80 to 90% of cases. Common causes for disappointment include altered sensation, persistent pain at the base of the thumb, stiffness or weakness in the hand.

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