

Ganglion Cyst of the Wrist

Ganglion cysts are balloon-like structures that arise from the membranous capsule around a joint or tendon. They are filled with jelly-like joint fluid. They are very common, especially in young females.

We don't know what causes ganglion cysts. In most people there are completely harmless, but in some people they cause some pain. Why they hurt in some people and not in others is also unknown. Very rarely, ganglion cysts may put pressure on surrounding anatomic structures, but that is very uncommon in my experience. I believe most ganglion cyst will disappear on their own if given enough time.

Treatment Options

Since many ganglion cysts disappear spontaneously, one treatment option is to do nothing and wait for the ganglion to disappear. Another option is to perform an "aspiration" of the cyst by putting a needle into the cyst under local anesthetic to remove the fluid it contains. This may get rid of the ganglion permanently, but the risk of recurrence is fairly high with aspiration treatment. We also do surgery to remove ganglions. Many other treatments have been tried for ganglion cysts, but for various reasons I don't recommend any of those other treatments.

Surgery to Remove Ganglions

Surgery to remove a ganglion at the wrist is generally done as an outpatient procedure under general anesthesia. An incision is made over the cyst and is carried all the way down to the joint capsule, where a small portion of the joint capsule is removed with the entire ganglion cyst. Postoperatively the wrist is put in a splint for a period of time, then range of motion exercises are performed. It is usually about a six-week recovery before the hand and wrist can resume normal activities.

Risks of Ganglion Surgery

Like all operations, surgery to remove ganglions entails some risk. An infection may develop which may require treatment with antibiotics or perhaps even more surgery. Bleeding problems may also develop which may require more surgery. Normal anatomic structures in the area around the ganglion can also get injured which could cause some loss of hand function. Ganglions on the palm side of the wrist generally arise adjacent to the radial artery, so that artery could get injured in the course of doing surgery, which may lead to problems with bleeding or with blood supply to the hand. We are operating on the wrist joint itself, so there is some chance of developing some loss of range of motion of the wrist or perhaps some wrist instability. Unfortunately there is a 10 to 20% chance of the ganglion recurring, even though it has been excised in its entirety. Finally, there

are some risks with general anesthesia, which could include pneumonia, blood clots that could go to the lungs, heart attacks, etc.