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Carpal Tunnel: True or False?

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by Victoria A. Liotta, DAc, LAc, LMT

Just as the term sciatica is misused for many types of discomfort in the hip and leg, carpal tunnel syndrome is loosely used to describe pain and tingling in the wrist or hand. It is a misconception, as pain of the wrist or hand may have its origins elsewhere, such as the forearm or even the musculature of the chest or neck.

Carpal tunnel syndrome may require surgery; however, similar conditions, rooted from other sources, can be resolved with methods such as acupuncture. The median nerve, which travels through the neck, chest, forearm and into the hand, is commonly the culprit of pain, accompanied by numbness and tingling. Although compression, or "pinching," of the median nerve at these areas can cause discomfort, true carpal tunnel syndrome is caused by tension to the median nerve at the flexor aspect of the wrist and between the carpal bones (carpal tunnel). The syndrome presents with numbness and tingling specifically in the thumb, index and half of the middle finger.

When approached by an individual with hand discomfort, it is good practice for a professional to perform classic orthopedic tests, including those that evaluate thumb and finger strength and pain and tingling. These tests will help determine if the carpal tunnel, in which the median nerve passes through, is affected. Testing the strength of thumb opposition, in particular, shows any weakness formed by carpal tunnel syndrome. Although the tests are not absolutely foolproof, if any are positive, true carpal tunnel syndrome is suspected.

More often than not, the condition is attributed to muscle tension, trigger points or tendonitis in the forearm, particularly the area responsible for curling one's fingers and wrist. In this case, the prognosis is more favorable than carpal tunnel syndrome. A muscle affected with tension and trigger points is the pronator teres, located just below the crease of the elbow. Other common muscles that impinge the median nerve causing symptoms similar to carpal tunnel syndrome are the scalenes of the neck and pectoralis minor of the chest.

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Licensed acupuncturists are trained to assess these areas for trigger points, weakness and limited range of motion.

Acupuncture and other modalities, such as massage, are often effective in resolving the tension and inflammation along the path of the median nerve that cause pain, numbness and tingling of the wrist and hand. By releasing the tension placed upon the median nerve and increasing blood flow to the area, symptoms of wrist and hand discomfort may be resolved.

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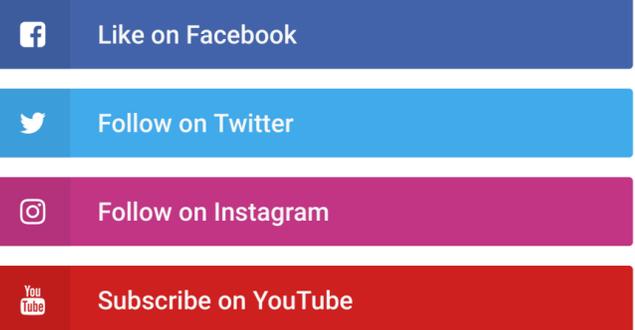
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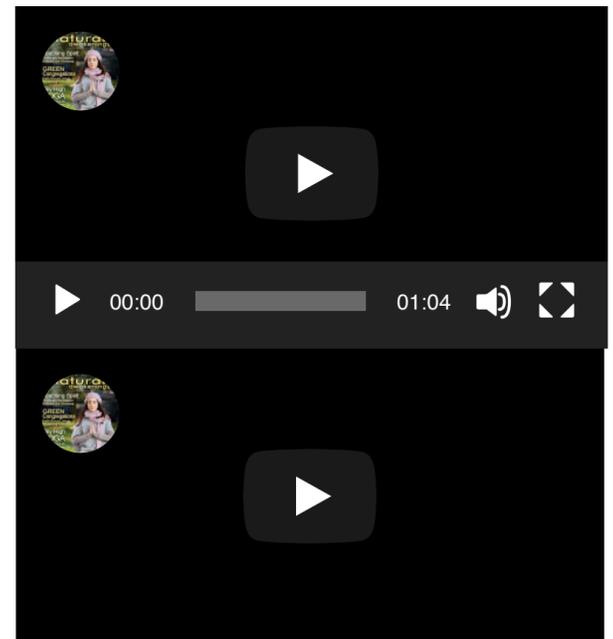
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