NONSURGICAL ORTHOPEDICS — KEY WEST CONCIERGE ORTHOPEDICS

A Sports Medicine Doctors View of Wrist Pain: What Should You Do?

Pain located on the thumb side of the wrist often comes from a tendon problem, rather than a deep joint problem. One common cause is De Quervain's stenosing tenosynovitis, meaning irritation of two thumb tendons where they pass through a tight tunnel at the wrist.

For bartenders and servers, the first question is not where you work but which motion sets it off and where the pain sits. "When pain is located on the thumb side of the wrist, I start by asking what grip or lifting motion brings that pain on," says Jason Pirozzolo, DO, a sports medicine physician. "That pattern usually tells me more than the job title does."

What is happening in the wrist

A common source of wrist and thumb pain is De Quervain's stenosing tenosynovitis, meaning irritation of two thumb tendons in the first dorsal compartment on the thumb side of the wrist. In plain terms, the tendons that help move your thumb get sore where they glide through a narrow passage.

That matters in service industry work because repeated gripping, tray carrying, bottle opening, and thumb motion can keep stressing the same spot. "What matters most is the exact location of the pain and the motion that repeats it," Dr. Pirozzolo says. "What usually matters less is the label someone gave it before anyone examined your wrist."

How to tell what points one way or the other

Pain that stays near the thumb side of the wrist points more toward tendon irritation in that area. Pain that spreads in a less clear pattern, or does not match thumb motion or grip, points away from that simple answer and needs a closer look.

The exam usually starts with where you hurt, which motion stirs it up, and whether a splint settles it down. Dr. Pirozzolo's view is practical. "I am trying to sort out a local tendon problem from something less specific," he says. "The story and exam usually answer that before anything else does."

How long recovery usually takes

Recovery is not one fixed timeline. It often depends on how long the pain has been there, how much thumb use your job still demands, and whether the wrist gets protected early with a splint and anti-inflammatory medicine when De Quervain's is suspected.

When symptoms do not improve, the next steps can include an injection or a surgical release. After a period in a wrist splint, rehabilitation becomes important, and a

rehabilitation text says physiotherapy is a key part of how well function returns once the splint is off.

Getting back to a restaurant shift

Getting back to full duty means more than having less pain at rest. You want to handle the wrist motions your shift demands without the same thumb side pain returning during grip, lift, and repeated hand use.

Protection during demanding work matters during recovery. A rehabilitation text advises therapists to stress protection during heavy vocational duties to help prevent reinjury, which fits the server or bartender who still has to carry, pour, and grip through a long shift.

- Use a splint as directed until the wrist settles enough for lighter hand use.
- Cut back repeated thumb gripping until those motions stop bringing the pain right back.
- After the splint comes off, start hand therapy exercises as advised and keep doing them until function returns.
- Return to heavier tray carrying, bottle opening, and long shifts only when those tasks no longer restart the same pain.

"The goal is not to nurse the hand forever," Dr. Pirozzolo says. "The goal is to calm it down, build function back, and protect it while you return to the work that set it off."

Dr. Pirozzolo's view is that wrist and thumb pain is usually easier to sort out when the painful motion is clear and the sore spot is precise. "The next best step is a focused exam before the problem turns into a longer detour from work," he says.

If thumb-side wrist pain keeps coming back with gripping, lifting, or repeated thumb use on the job, get it checked soon. Contact Key West Concierge Orthopedics.

Questions About Wrist and Thumb Pain

Can thumb-side wrist pain come from tendons instead of a bone?

Yes. One common cause is De Quervain's, which is irritation of two thumb tendons where they pass through a tight tunnel at the wrist.

What is usually tried first for suspected De Quervain's?

A common first step is a splint and nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory medicine. If symptoms do not improve, injection or surgical release can be considered.

Why does work protection matter during recovery?

Demanding hand use can stir the pain back up. Rehabilitation guidance stresses protecting the wrist during heavy work to help prevent reinjury.

Sources

- Upper Limb Pain chapter (textbook-style reference), supplied excerpt 5899.

- Wrist and Hand Injuries chapter (rehabilitation text), supplied excerpt 4006.

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