Thoracic Outlet Syndrome

Arm tingles and hand goes numb with your arms up

Tips from your physiotherapist at Ace Sports Medicine

ACE SPORTS MEDICINE
UPPER MOUNT GRAVATT

The nerves and blood vessels to the arm pass through a narrow gap between the collarbone, the first rib and the neck muscles. When that gap narrows, the arm goes heavy, tingly or numb, especially overhead.

WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT THORACIC OUTLET SYNDROME

1 WHAT IT IS

Compression of the nerves, or less often the blood vessels, as they pass through the thoracic outlet between the collarbone, first rib and neck muscles.

A SQUEEZE AT THE BASE OF THE NECK, NOT THE WRIST.

2 THE PATTERN

Heaviness, tingling or numbness running down the arm into the hand, worse with the arms overhead, such as hanging washing, painting or sleeping with an arm up, and often an ache near the collarbone.

OVERHEAD MAKES IT WORSE; THAT IS THE CLUE.

3 WHO GETS IT

The nerve type accounts for about 95 percent of cases. It affects women three to four times more often than men and most often develops between the ages of 20 and 50.

OVERHEAD WORK, POSTURE AND PAST INJURY CONTRIBUTE.

4 WHY IT IS MISSED

The wrist and the neck are usually tested first, and both can be normal. Symptoms that follow arm position rather than wrist use point to the outlet instead.

A CLEAR WRIST TEST DOES NOT RULE IT OUT.

5 WHAT HELPS

Physiotherapy is the accepted first-line treatment for the nerve type: releasing the neck and chest muscles that narrow the outlet, strengthening the shoulder girdle, nerve mobility and changing overhead loads.

CONSERVATIVE REHAB COMES FIRST.

6 SURGERY

Reserved for persistent, severe cases that do not respond to a proper course of conservative care. The first randomised trial comparing the two was only published in 2022.

A LAST STEP, NOT A FIRST ONE.

DO I NEED A SCAN?

Not usually to start. The diagnosis rests on the pattern of symptoms and a physical assessment, including position tests that reproduce the tingling. Imaging is considered when vascular signs are present or symptoms do not respond to rehabilitation.

WHEN TO SEEK HELP

- Arm tingling with overhead positions that keeps returning
- Symptoms that wake you at night
- A clumsy hand or dropping things
- A cold, pale or blue hand or arm
- Sudden swelling of the arm
- Visible wasting of the hand muscles

A cold, pale, blue or suddenly swollen arm needs same-day medical care.

WHAT CAN A PHYSIOTHERAPIST DO?

- Test whether symptoms follow arm position
- Screen the neck, shoulder and wrist as well
- Release the neck and chest muscles that narrow the outlet
- Strengthen the shoulder girdle and posture muscles
- Guide nerve mobility exercises
- Plan overhead work and sport loads

WHAT YOU CAN DO NOW

If your arm goes numb with your hands up, start here:

- **Notice which positions trigger it**
- **Break up long overhead work**
- **Avoid sleeping with the arm overhead**
- **Book a physio assessment**

Conservative care is the first-line approach. Please discuss specifics at an appointment.

Helping You Perform at Your Best

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Need support with arm tingling and numbness?

Book your appointment today

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