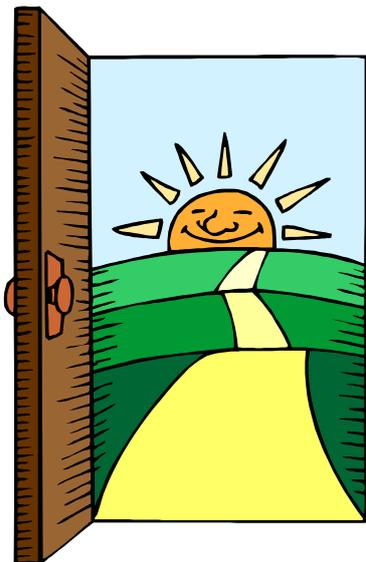


# Hand therapy after trapeziectomy

8 – 12 weeks after surgery



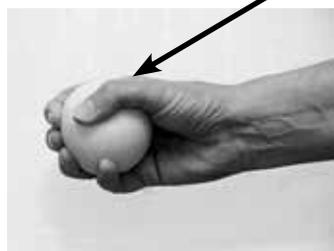
Now that it is 8 weeks after your surgery you are in your final stage of rehabilitation. You will now begin to improve the strength of your wrist and thumb with a home exercise programme, working towards full function by 12 weeks after surgery when your rehabilitation programme comes to an end. However, your hand will continue to improve for up to a year after your surgery - but you cannot expect to get back the strength that you had before you suffered with arthritis.

If you no longer have any swelling in your hand and your range of movement is good, you can stop doing the exercises that you were given for the 4 – 8 weeks stage. However, you may still find that your thumb is painful at times. It is not unusual for pain to increase as you start to do strengthening work and heavier tasks around the house. You will still need to use your splint for comfort and for some heavier tasks such as gardening. Be guided by your pain and take the opportunity for your thumb to rest and recover, as required.

## Increasing strength of your thumb, wrist and hand

Your hand strength will improve through everyday activity and normal use of your hand. However there are some specific exercises, given below, that you can do now, to help regain your strength. With all these exercises, respect your pain. As with any muscle strengthening task, build up the amount of force, length of time you do the exercise and number of repetitions gradually. Start these exercises 'little and often' and see how your thumb feels, before progressing to do more. Make sure that you are using your thumb in normal patterns of movement – in particular, do not do any exercises that over stretch the middle joint of your thumb – make sure your therapist has explained what this means to you.

**Balls:** light squeeze balls can be used to increase hand strength – hold the grip for a 3 – 4 seconds. Start with light foam or rubber balls and then gradually move to balls with more resistance.



Keep the middle joint of your thumb straight or slightly flexed. Do not let it hyper-extend. The photograph shows a good position for this joint



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The evidence used in the preparation of this leaflet is available on request. Please email: [patient.information@salisbury.nhs.uk](mailto:patient.information@salisbury.nhs.uk) if you would like a reference list.

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Practice throwing, catching and bouncing balls: start with a light sponge ball and then move on to something heavier, like a tennis ball. Practice playing 'two-ball' against a wall. All these exercises will also help to get back more spontaneous movement in your hand.

**Saucepans:** practice carrying an empty saucepan around your kitchen. Start with a light-weight milk saucepan and then gradually increase the weight of pan. You can also increase the weight of the task by adding other weights such as a small tin of baked beans or sardines. Carrying the saucepan for longer distances will also help your muscles to get stronger. However, be reasonable with your thumb – you are always likely to find very heavy pans difficult.

**Pegs:** Strengthen your thumb using clothes pegs. Position the pegs on to a piece of card or a plastic lid – practice taking them on and off, making sure that the position of all your thumb joints is normal.

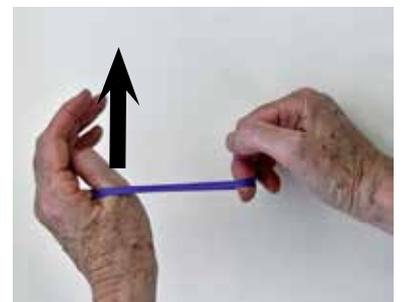
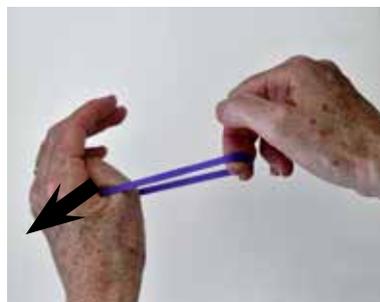


**Elastic bands:** Elastic bands can be used to strengthen the muscles around the base of your thumb. You can strengthen the muscles that open out your thumb and those used in pinch. Hook the elastic band on the fingers of your un-operated hand, so you do not stress that thumb. Make sure that the elastic band sits on or below the middle joint on your operated hand, so you do not stress it. Your operated thumb needs to work against the elastic band. Start with a lightweight band. As you get stronger you can increase the resistance by using two elastic light bands or a thicker heavier band. Be guided by your pain – do not push into pain. Your therapist will demonstrate these exercises to make sure that you can do them correctly.

1. Opening out your thumb

2. Pinching your thumb against the side of your palm

3. Pulling your thumb down into your palm

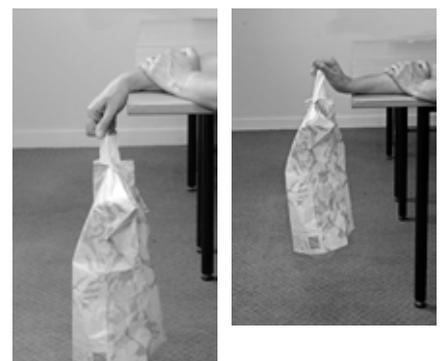


**Light dumb-bells or weighted carrier bag:** use these to help strengthen your forearm muscles. A light dumb-bell will be the easiest weight to use. Otherwise you can improvise with a carrier bag using a small weight inside such as a small tin of baked beans, pack of butter. Start with about 8oz weight and then gradually build this up. Work within your comfortable pain levels.

## 1. Wrist extension

Rest your forearm on a table, so your hand is over the edge – with your palm facing the floor. Keeping your forearm resting on the table and with the bag held in your hand, straighten up your wrist. Hold the load for a slow count of 5 and then relax. This will work the muscles on the back of your forearm.

Repeat this 10 times, as pain allows, 2 – 3 times a day.



## 2. Wrist flexion

This exercise is the same to the one above, except this time, your forearm is resting on the table with your palm facing the ceiling. This will work the muscles on the front of your forearm.



### What can I do at home now?

You will now be able to increase how much you do around the house and can expect to have good use of your hand by 12 -14 weeks after your surgery. Activities around the home such as cooking, cleaning and other housework tasks can be good rehabilitation activities. These activities can include:

- making pastry, scones and bread
- preparing vegetables – start with easy tasks such as peeling potatoes. Don't try to cut swede
- vacuuming and moving light furniture
- light gardening – gradually increase how much load you put through your hand
- light cutting with sharp secateurs – nothing too thick or involving a lot of force
- pegging out washing
- washing and drying up
- cooking
- start lifting – start with light loads and be guided by pain
- light hammering.

Beware of tasks that put a large amount of force through your thumb such as opening new tight jars or using a manual tin opener. Activities such as these can place excessive loads on your thumb.

Do not return to heavy DIY until at least 12 weeks after your surgery and even then be guided by pain. Despite excellent surgery, your thumb will never be as strong as it was before you had arthritis. You must respect the surgery that you have had and always be prepared to adjust some of these heavier tasks by using appropriate gadgets and equipment. Such as:



Baby-boa jar opener



Battery operated tin opener

Take time to look around a good kitchen and hardware shop to find good quality equipment and tools that will make your household and DIY jobs easier on your hands.

## Driving

You should now be able to return to driving, depending on which thumb has been operated on and the model of your car. If your left thumb has undergone surgery, you should be cautious

about using your handbrake. Do not place excessive load on your thumb and be guided by pain. Should this be a problem in the longer term, it is possible to get a simple adaptation to most car handbrakes that provides a large lever to operate the push button. In most locations you can find a garage that specialises in car adaptations. Alternatively, consider moving to a car that has an automatic handbrake and look for other ways to help your hands during driving, such as power assisted steering.

## **Work**

Depending on your job you may be able to return to work now. However, if your job involves a lot of heavy manual work you may need to delay return until at least 12 weeks after surgery. You need to explore the details of your own situation with your occupational therapist.

## **Splints**

Over the past 4 weeks you will have gradually weaned off your splint for light everyday tasks. You can now continue to reduce the use of your splint further over the next 4 weeks. However, you may still need to wear your splint for heavier tasks or if pain is a problem. It may help to use your splint if you are going to do a job that is heavier than normal such as when gardening. Continue to think about your splint use as like 'slippers or wellingtons'. You can expect to discard your splint from everyday life at 12 weeks. However, many people still find some benefit in using their splint for heavy tasks, such as gardening, in the longer term.

## **Pain**

Most people continue to experience pain at this stage and this can increase as you use your thumb more. However, high levels of pain might indicate that you are doing too much or working on tasks that are too heavy. If so, you may need to take pain killers, use an anti-inflammatory gel or use your splint to help ease the pain. Pain should continue to settle gradually. However, most people do not find the real benefits of the surgery until 6 – 12 months after surgery. If you get pain following activity – don't panic, just splint and/or rest your thumb and let the pain settle again.

## **Sensation**

You are likely to still have pins and needles, hypersensitivity, numbness in the thumb and back of your hand or sensations like shooting electric pains. This is due to the recovery of the small nerve - the sensory branch of the radial nerve – which was moved slightly out of the way during surgery. The nerve was not cut and will recover. These nerve sensations will settle with time – usually between 3 – 6 months post-surgery.

You will see your therapist 3 months after surgery to check that your progress is going along as expected. However, if you have any concerns regarding your hand, please contact your therapist.

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