

# Are *Numb Hands* Driving You Crazy?

By: Katharine Leppard, MD, PT

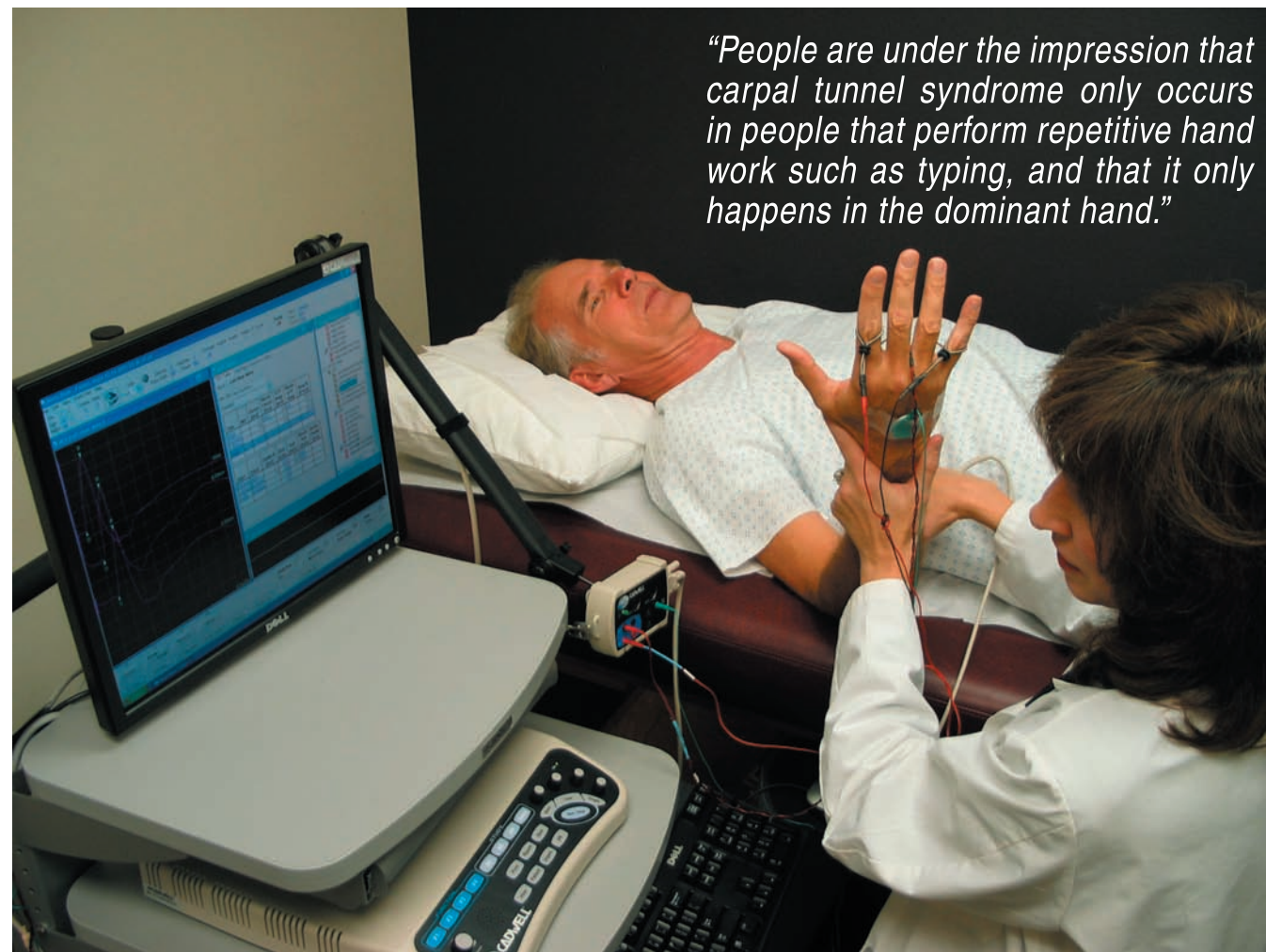
**N**umb hands are not normal. Often the onset of numbness is so slow and gradual that people think it is a normal condition and do not seek medical care until pain or weakness occurs. Certain nerves are located in regions of the body that are especially vulnerable to compression injuries. The symptoms of these different nerves being pinched can be similar, and sometimes more than one nerve at a time is pinched, making diagnosis challenging.

The most common nerve compression is Carpal Tunnel Syndrome

(CTS) or entrapment of the median nerve at the wrist. The carpal tunnel is a narrow passage formed by the carpal bones of the wrist and the transverse carpal ligament. Inside the tunnel are the tendons that flex the finger and the median nerve. People are under the impression that carpal tunnel syndrome only occurs in people that perform repetitive hand work such as typing, and that it only happens in the dominant hand. Although it does occur in these situations, it also can occur in the general population as well and can be in the non-dominant hand.

Conditions such as diabetes, age

over 40, rheumatoid arthritis, hypothyroidism, past injury to the wrist and pregnancy all have increased risk of developing carpal tunnel syndrome. The classic distribution of numbness is in the thumb, index, middle and half of the ring finger, but it can involve the entire hand. Typically the numbness starts at night; patients will shake their hands to awaken them. As the condition worsens, the numbness begins more frequent, often awakening people at night and begins to occur during the day with activities such as gripping or driving. This can progress to severe pain and weakness if pressure on the nerve persists.



*"People are under the impression that carpal tunnel syndrome only occurs in people that perform repetitive hand work such as typing, and that it only happens in the dominant hand."*

I have had patients tell me they have trouble with buttons or zippers as they cannot feel the buttons or the metal tab of the zipper. I have had patients give up sewing because they cannot feel the needle. Left untreated, CTS can lead to considerable discomfort, impaired function of the hand and permanent weakness. Treatment can include wrist splints, therapy, cortisone injections and surgery depending on the severity of the nerve compression.

Cubital tunnel, or entrapment of the ulnar nerve at the inner elbow, is the second most common pinched nerve. This nerve is in the area of the inner elbow "funny bone". Typical symptoms include numbness in the little finger and half of the ring finger, with inner elbow pain and hand

weakness. Bending the elbow for long periods, such as while talking on the phone or sleeping with the elbow bent, pulls the ulnar nerve in the cubital tunnel taut and often triggers numbness. I have also had patients with wasting (atrophy) of the hand muscles as the first symptom. Treatment is typically surgery to relocate or decompress the nerve.

Pinched nerves in the neck, or cervical radiculopathies, can occur from disc bulges or bone spurs causing pain and numbness radiating into an arm. Spinal stenosis is narrowing of the central spinal canal which can pinch the spinal cord causing numbness and weakness. Early diagnosis is important to prevent serious injury. Treatment options include physical therapy, cervical traction, epidural

steroid injections or surgery depending on the specific condition identified.

Less common upper extremity nerve entrapments include radial nerve compression by the outer elbow and thoracic outlet syndrome in the armpit region. Peripheral neuropathies, a general slowing of all the nerves, can also cause hand numbness. Typically this condition starts in the feet before progressing to the hands.

Numb hands can occur from a variety of causes, some of them quite serious. It is important to seek medical evaluation from a physician who specializes in electrodiagnostic medicine for proper diagnosis and treatment recommendations. Remember, numb hands are not normal. **S**

## Numb Hands or Feet?

Katharine Leppard, MD, PT

12 Years Private Practice in Colorado Springs

Board Certified:

- Electrodiagnostic Medicine
- Neuromuscular Medicine
- Physical Medicine & Rehab



Medical  
Rehabilitation  
Specialists

Call for an appointment 719-575-1800

3470 Centennial Blvd, Suite 110, Colorado Springs, CO 80907  
Accepting most insurances [www.medical-rehab.com](http://www.medical-rehab.com)



Katharine Leppard M.D.