

What is a Trigger Thumb?

Trigger thumb is a condition seen in young children where the thumb gets stuck in a bent position as the tendon is unable to glide freely. If you feel carefully at the base of your child's thumb you can feel the rucked-up tendon as a nodule (about the size of a pea). Usually the thumb is able to be straightened to start with but can become fixed. In 1 out of 3 patients it occurs in both thumbs. It may occasionally affect a different finger in which case it is called a trigger finger.

This is usually not a painful condition but there may be some pain when they try to straighten the affected thumb. It may occasionally be uncomfortable for the first few weeks but this usually settles quite quickly. In children, it is most commonly the thumb that is affected. It is rather common, occurring in approximately three out of 1,000 children at 1 year of age.

Why Does it Happen?

The exact cause of trigger thumbs is unknown. It is usually not present at birth, and usually presents between the ages of 1 and 4. It is not caused by an injury or associated with other medical problems. The condition occurs when the tendon is unable to pass through its tunnel (or sheath) freely when moving the finger. This is because of enlargement of either the tendon or sheath. The thumb may pop or click when your child tries to straighten it or it may be fixed in this bent position.

How is Treated?

In smaller children we know that most cases of trigger thumb will resolve of its own accord with no treatment. Sometimes times though this can take a year or so to completely go away. It is quite safe to wait that long to allow this to happen. There is no evidence that splints or specific exercises help.

For the very small number of children for whom it doesn't get better on its own after a year or so we may consider surgery. This would involve a general anaesthetic which means your child would be asleep during the surgery. Therefore the advice initially is that it is perfectly safe to simply keep an eye on this problem and expect it to get better on its own gradually. We generally would only perform this surgery after the age of 3 or 4.

What Now?

Generally if a child is referred who is very young or have just noticed a trigger thumb we will send you this information leaflet. If your child is over 3 had has had a trigger thumb for than 1 year we will see your child in the clinic either using video call or a face to face appointment and discuss the next steps with you.