

CARPAL TUNNEL SYNDROME

The Occupational Epidemic of the 90's

By Curtis Hemlock, B.S.

One of the most significant developments in our ever-changing world is the restructuring of our work force. Not only are there more women taking jobs these days, but the jobs themselves, and the tools and equipment to perform them, are changing as well. Unfortunately, these changes have created new problems in occupational safety, and none more serious than the epidemic of carpal tunnel syndrome, and other repetitive motion injuries. According to the U.S. Dept. of Labor, the number of reported repetitive motion injuries has increased over 100% in the past two years, and now account for over 50% of all reported injuries nationwide. And, the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health has reported that as many as 20 million workers hold jobs considered to be high risk for this type of problem.

Carpal tunnel syndrome (CTS), is caused by compression of the median nerve as it passes through the wrist. This occurs when the size of the carpal tunnel is narrowed by wrist flexion, or the tunnel is "crowded" due to swelling of the flexor tendons to the fingers. Symptoms include pain, numbness, tingling, and loss of grip strength. If left untreated the damage is cumulative, and the results can be permanent. Though women develop CTS more frequently than men due to physiological and employment factors, anyone performing a repetitive task with their hands is susceptible.



Employers are only now beginning to address this growing problem in a serious manner. As the cost of dealing with injured employees skyrockets, businesses are forced to make changes in the work place to reduce their risk of injury. This includes restructuring work stations and tools, rotating jobs, allowing more breaks, and reducing output requirements. According to Dennis Hawkins of Insurance Management Services, a local administrator of workers compensation benefits, there is definitely a motivating factor to consider. "Carpal tunnel syndrome is rapidly becoming the most expensive individual component of the manufacturing process", he states.

For the person suffering from CTS, the medical options have been somewhat limited. Wrist splints, anti-inflammatory drugs, and conventional physical therapy are generally the first form of treatment. If this fails, the patient is usually referred for surgery, which may or may not eliminate the symptoms. Recently, a new

form of treatment utilizing two computer-controlled microamperage stimulators called the Electro-acuscope/Myopulse system, has shown a high degree of success for all repetitive motion injuries. In fact, several prominent companies including A.T.&T., Dow Chemical, Hormel, Swift-Eckrich, and Heinz Foods, have installed these machines in their plant's medical departments, and report significantly lower levels of lost time and necessary surgeries.

Through a combined effort by employers, insurance companies, unions, and medical providers, assisted by federal agencies such as OSHA and others, CTS can probably be held to a more controlled level. Otherwise, we will be faced with a severe shortage of healthy workers, and a huge group of disabled adults, to survive in an increasingly competitive world economy.

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Actor, Jeff Meek, with stuntman, John Thorp