

DR REBECCA AYERS
Plastic, Reconstructive and Hand Surgeon

COMPLICATIONS FROM HAND SURGERY

The following are general and non-specific complications that can occur following hand surgery. There are also specific complications, associated with specific procedures, these will be discussed separately when discussing your operation in more detail.

Swelling

Swelling following the operation is common. Increasing swelling, especially in association with redness may indicate infection. If you suspect you are developing an infection, let Rebecca know and she will review you and provide you with antibiotics.

Bleeding

Again, bruising is common after operations. There may be some minor seepage from wounds following the surgery and this will settle over time. Steady bleeding from a wound or a collection of blood (a haematoma) beneath the wound may require some sutures to be removed and/or a return to theatre to stop the bleeding. Again, please contact Rebecca.

Infection

Superficial infections are common (5%) and cause redness, swelling, pain and pus around the stitches. Superficial infections tend to settle quickly with oral antibiotics and regular dressings. Deep infections around the tendons and bones are rare and may need admission to hospital for intravenous antibiotics and further surgery. Deep infections may cause longer-term complications.

If you suspect you are developing an infection let Rebecca know and she will review you and provide you with antibiotics.

Scarring

Every operation leaves scars. Scars may initially be tender and thickened, they should soften and become more comfortable with time. They may be numb permanently. Firm massage should help the scars improve.

Delayed wound healing

Sometimes the wound splits open (dehiscence) or takes a little while to heal. The reasons for this may include infection, bleeding, or poor blood supply to the wound edges. The wounds will heal with dressings and Rebecca will arrange this for you.

Stiffness

Stiffness may be due to swelling, scar tissue or immobility and will be made worse by infection or other complications. Rebecca will refer you to a specialist hand therapist to optimise your recovery and allow for safe mobilisation.

Damage to adjacent structures

Other nerves, vessels and structures could be inadvertently damaged during the operation. This is more common in operations that occur after trauma or when there is a lot of scar tissue at the site of the surgery.

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Complex regional pain syndrome (CRPS)

CRPS is chronic pain syndrome that is mediated by nerves. It is not fully understood and surgeons cannot predict who will be affected. Mild CRPS occurs in 5% of patients. It results in pain, stiffness and swelling, out of proportion to the surgery; the pain is poorly controlled by simple analgesia and may be experienced as burning, electric shock like and is very unpleasant. If your pain is not controlled by analgesia then please contact Rebecca – there are excellent forms of pain relief for CRPS, but they need to be prescribed specially. Mild cases will have good resolution; severe cases are very rare, but may leave the limb permanently stiff and swollen.

Please see the associated information sheet

Cold intolerance

Is very common after injury or procedures on fingers, especially following replantation. The reason for cold intolerance is not clear, but causes an exaggerated response to cold. There are often four elements to cold intolerance: pain or discomfort, stiffness, altered sensation and colour change. Not everyone experiences all four components. Cold intolerance tends to develop over the first three months following injury or surgery and remains fairly constant over the first 12 months. It may improve over subsequent years but rarely resolves completely. This may cause difficulty working in cold environments. It is very important to wear top quality gloves that protect from both wind chill and cold.