

Thoracic Outlet Syndrome

In a previous column, we discussed carpal tunnel syndrome (CTS) as a common cause of numbness and tingling in the fingers and hand. However, CTS, a compression of the median nerve in the wrist, is not the only potential cause of hand numbness and tingling. Thoracic Outlet Syndrome is another cause.

Let's start with some definitions. The thorax is the chest cavity. The thoracic outlet (sometimes also known as the thoracic inlet) is the area between the neck and shoulder through which structures entering and leaving the chest cavity pass. A variety of muscles and other soft tissues are found in this area. Here, blood vessels from the chest meet nerves from the neck and shoulder, and then tend to travel together into the arms in "neurovascular bundles."

The symptoms of Thoracic Outlet Syndrome (TOS) arise due to compression of the neurovascular bundle by muscle, ligament, or bone structures in the neck/shoulder region. Often, forward-head/rounded shoulders posture, repetitive carrying of heavy objects on the shoulders (e.g., backpacks), and repetitive overhead arm motions lead to the onset of symptoms. Besides hand tingling, symptoms may include swelling, heaviness, and/or fatigue of the arm and hand; pain and muscular weakness.

Treatment for TOS begins with a visit to your physician. Because the symptoms of thoracic outlet syndrome mimic other more serious disorders, an accurate diagnosis is important. Conservative treatment including postural retraining, shoulder strengthening and stretching exercises will usually alleviate symptoms over time. Surgery is rarely necessary.

This is intended as general information regarding Thoracic Outlet Syndrome. Please consult your physician or health care professional for information regarding your specific health issues.