

Ganglion Cysts



What is a Ganglion Cyst?

A **ganglion cyst** is a fluid-filled swelling that develops near a joint or tendon, most commonly in the **wrist** or **hand**. It is filled with a thick, jelly-like fluid similar to the fluid normally found within joints.

Ganglion cysts are **benign (non-cancerous)** and do not spread to other parts of the body. They may vary in size and can sometimes change over time, becoming larger or smaller.

The most common locations for ganglion cysts include:

- The **back of the wrist (dorsal wrist ganglion)** — the most common type
- The **front of the wrist (volar wrist ganglion)**
- The **base of the finger**
- Around finger joints

Some ganglion cysts cause pain or interfere with movement, while others cause little discomfort but may be noticeable due to their appearance.

Causes and Risk Factors

The exact cause of ganglion cysts is not always clear, but they are thought to arise from irritation or weakness in the tissues surrounding joints or tendons.

Common contributing factors include:

Joint or Tendon Irritation

Repetitive wrist movements or strain may contribute to the formation of ganglion cysts.

Previous Injury

A previous injury to the wrist or hand may increase the likelihood of developing a ganglion cyst.

Joint Degeneration

Ganglion cysts can sometimes be associated with underlying joint wear or arthritis.

Age

Ganglion cysts most commonly occur in adults between **20 and 50 years of age**, although they can occur at any age.

Symptoms

Symptoms of ganglion cysts vary depending on their size and location.

Common signs include:

- A **visible lump** near a joint or tendon
- A lump that may **change in size** over time
- **Pain or discomfort**, particularly with movement
- **Tenderness** around the cyst
- **Reduced movement**, depending on the cyst location
- **Weakness** when gripping objects
- Occasionally, **numbness or tingling**, if the cyst presses on a nearby nerve

Some ganglion cysts cause little or no pain but may be noticeable due to their appearance.

Diagnosis & Investigation

Ganglion cysts are usually diagnosed **based on clinical history and physical examination**.

During your visit:

- The surgeon will assess the **size, location, and consistency** of the swelling.
- The cyst may feel smooth and firm and may change in size with movement.

Imaging

- Imaging is **not always required**.
 - **Ultrasound** may be used to confirm the diagnosis or distinguish the cyst from other types of swelling.
 - **X-rays** may be performed if there is concern about underlying joint problems.
 - In **rare cases**, **MRI scans** may be used to assess deeper cysts or complex cases.
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Non-Surgical Treatment

Many ganglion cysts do not require treatment and may resolve spontaneously.

Non-surgical options may include:

Observation

If the cyst is not causing significant symptoms, simple observation may be recommended.

Some ganglion cysts reduce in size or disappear without treatment.

Splinting

Temporary splinting may help reduce irritation and allow symptoms to settle.

Aspiration (Fluid Drainage)

In selected cases, the cyst may be drained using a needle (**aspiration**). This is usually performed in the clinic.

However, ganglion cysts frequently **recur after aspiration**, as the underlying connection to the joint remains.

Surgical Treatment

Surgery may be recommended if the cyst is painful, recurrent, or interferes with daily activities.

Ganglion Excision

This procedure involves removing the cyst along with its connection to the joint or tendon sheath.

Key points about the procedure:

- Usually performed as a **day-case procedure**
- Typically carried out under **local or regional anaesthetic**
- A **small incision** is made over the cyst
- The cyst and its stalk are removed
- The wound is closed and dressed

Removing the stalk reduces the risk of recurrence.

Surgery is generally effective, although recurrence can still occur.

Recovery

Recovery following ganglion cyst treatment depends on the treatment performed.

- Some discomfort and swelling are common after treatment.
- **Hand therapy** may be recommended in selected cases to restore movement.

Recovery times vary depending on treatment:

- Following **aspiration**, normal activities can usually resume quickly.
 - After **surgical excision**, light activities may resume within **1–2 weeks**.
 - Most patients regain good function once the wound has healed.
 - Full recovery may take **several weeks**.
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Risks

Although treatment is usually successful, complications can occur, including:

- Recurrence of the cyst
- Infection
- Scar tenderness
- Stiffness
- Injury to nearby nerves or blood vessels (particularly with volar wrist ganglia)
- Persistent discomfort

Recurrence remains the most common complication.

When to See One of Our Hand Specialists

You should consult a hand specialist if:

- You notice a **lump** on your wrist or hand
- The lump is **painful** or increasing in size
- The cyst interferes with movement or daily activities
- You experience **numbness or tingling**
- The diagnosis is uncertain

If you develop a rapidly enlarging swelling, significant pain following trauma, or signs of infection such as redness or warmth, this should be assessed urgently in the Emergency Department (A&E).

Book an appointment:

