

hand + wrist
Surgery of Louisville



Thumb Pain Relief: Get Your Thumb in Gear

Discover Benefits of Treatment, How Touch®
Total Thumb, CMC Arthroplasty Can Help, and
Ways to Get Relief

Includes 7 Gentle Thumb Exercises



Provided by Michael C. Nicoson, M.D.

About This Guide & Dr. Michael Nicoson



This thumb pain relief guide was created by Dr. Michael C. Nicoson, board-certified by the American Board of Plastic Surgery and founder of Hand + Wrist of Louisville, PLLC. Dr. Nicoson specializes in hand, wrist, and peripheral nerve surgery, helping patients restore motion, strength, and comfort in their everyday activities.

Is Thumb Pain Limiting Your Life?

You use your thumbs for almost everything, from turning a doorknob or opening a jar, to texting a loved one and gripping your morning coffee. In short, your thumbs are essential.

When the base of the thumb becomes stiff, swollen, or painful, your world gets smaller. You stop doing the things you love because the pain just isn't worth it.

Actions to Avoid with Thumb Pain

- **Pinching & Gripping:** Tasks like opening jars, turning doorknobs, or holding heavy objects.
- **Repetitive Motions:** Texting, "gamer's thumb," typing, knitting, wringing clothes, or lifting/carrying infants.
- **Overuse:** Prolonged use of the hand and wrist in ways that strain the thumb tendons.

You May Have Basal Joint Arthritis (CMC Arthritis).

This is a type of thumb arthritis that causes significant pain and stiffness. Injuries and repetitive motion can cause this arthritis over time. However, you won't know for sure unless your thumb is evaluated by a doctor.

You are not alone, and you do not have to "just live with it." While many people believe fusion or removing the bone is the only option, medical technology has advanced.

Inside this guide, you will discover:

- Why your thumb hurts (understanding the anatomy)
- Treatment options, including Touch® Total Thumb CMC Arthroplasty: A modern solution offered by Dr. Nicoson.
- 7 daily exercises to help maintain flexibility and reduce stiffness right now.

Why Does It Hurt?

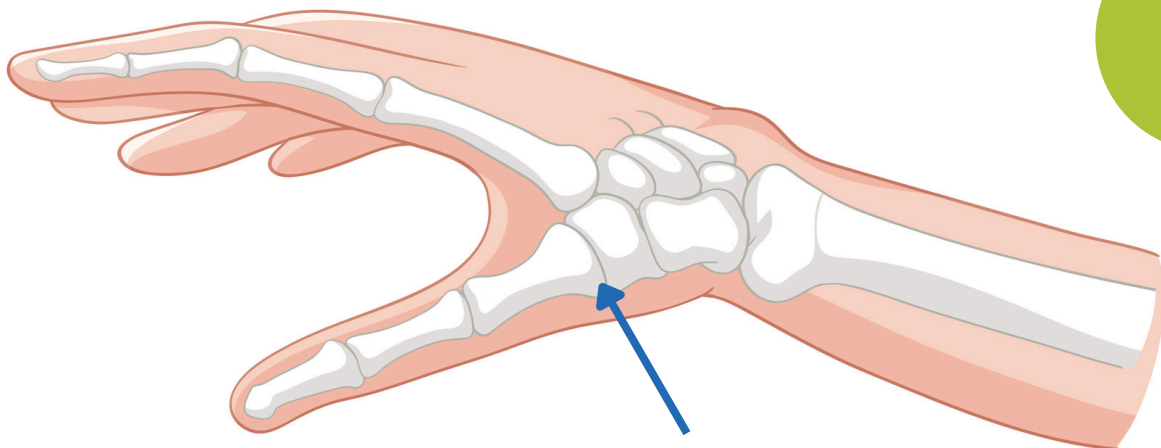
Understanding Your Thumb Joint

The carpometacarpal (CMC) joint is located at the very base of your thumb, near the wrist. It acts as a universal joint, allowing your thumb to swivel, pivot, and pinch.

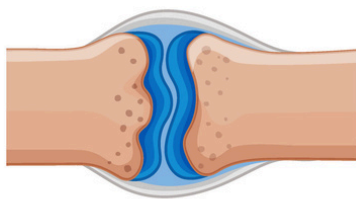
The "Shock Absorber" Problem

Think of the cartilage in this joint as a shock absorber. Over years of use, this cartilage wears away. Eventually, the cushioning is gone, leading to:

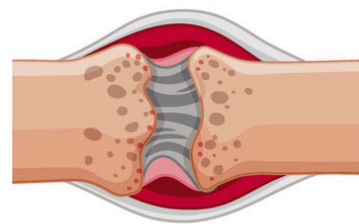
- **Bone-on-bone friction:** This causes the sharp, grinding pain you feel.
- **Instability:** The joint may slip out of place, causing a visible "bump" at the base of the thumb.
- **Weakness:** You lose the strength required to pinch or grip objects securely.



The carpometacarpal (CMC) joint



Healthy thumb joint with cartilage



An arthritic joint with bone-on-bone contact

Thumb Pain Relief With Conservative Treatment

Surgery may not be what's needed for your thumb pain, though it is the best way to treat chronic thumb pain and thumb arthritis, or basal joint arthritis. For many patients, thumb arthritis can be managed to a degree without surgery.

Some conservative treatments that your doctor may suggest include:

1. Splinting & Bracing (Thumb Spica Splint). Wearing a specialized Thumb Spica Splint supports the joint and limits movement, giving the inflamed area time to rest. Many patients find relief by wearing a soft splint at night or a rigid splint during heavy activities (like gardening or cleaning).



2. Anti-Inflammatory Medication. Over-the-counter NSAIDs (like ibuprofen or naproxen) can help reduce swelling and pain during flare-ups. Additionally, prescription or OTC gels (like diclofenac/Voltaren) can be rubbed directly into the joint. This is often preferred by patients who want to avoid stomach side effects from pills.



3. Corticosteroid Injections. If splints and pills aren't enough, your doctor may recommend a targeted steroid injection directly into the CMC joint. This provides a potent dose of anti-inflammatory medication right where it hurts. It can offer significant pain relief that lasts for months, allowing you to work on strengthening exercises.





4. Hand Therapy. Working with a certified hand therapist can help you learn how to use your hand differently to avoid strain, alongside specific exercises to stabilize the thumb base.





Living With Thumb Arthritis: Joint Protection Strategies


While medical treatment is vital, changing how you use your hands at home can significantly reduce daily pain. These "Joint Protection" techniques reduce the load on your CMC joint.


 **Avoid the "Pinch" Grip:** Avoid pinching objects between your thumb and index finger (like carrying a heavy plate or a book).

 **Try this instead:** Scoop objects up with your palm or carry them with two hands, keeping the weight close to your body.

 **Stop Using Tools That Strain:** Small, thin handles require a tight grip, which grinds the thumb joint.

 **Try this instead:** Modify the tools in your life. Build up handles on toothbrushes, pens, and cutlery with foam tubing, or buy "ergonomic" tools with thick rubber grips.

 **Avoid Twisting Motions:** Turning round doorknobs or small faucets requires high torque on the thumb.

 **Try this instead:** Install lever-style door handles and use "jar opener" gadgets in the kitchen to break the vacuum seal without force.

When to Stop Using Your Thumb and Talk to a Doctor

"Pushing through the pain" can cause inflammation that takes days to settle. If an activity hurts, stop using your thumb and talk to a doctor.

If you have tried these home strategies and conservative treatments but the pain persists, you may be ready to move on to the Touch® Total Thumb CMC Arthroplasty.

Is Your Thumb Pain Treatable? Yes!

If you have tried splinting, medication, and injections but still suffer, it may be time to consider the next step. You might be a candidate for total thumb arthroplasty if:

- **Conservative care has failed:** Splints and injections no longer provide relief.
- **Pain is constant:** You feel an ache even when your hand is at rest or while sleeping.
- **Function is compromised:** You can no longer turn a key, open a jar, or button a shirt without sharp pain.
- **Imaging confirms degeneration:** X-rays show significant arthritis, meaning the cartilage is gone and there is bone-on-bone contact.



The Modern Fix for Thumb Pain:

Touch® Total Thumb CMC Arthroplasty

For years, the standard surgery for thumb arthritis involved removing the small bone at the base of the thumb (trapeziectomy) and using a tendon to cushion the space. While effective, the recovery can be long, and pinch strength doesn't always fully return.

Dr. Nicoson offers an advanced alternative: The Touch® Dual Mobility Prosthesis.

What is it? Think of it like a miniature hip replacement for your thumb. Instead of removing the bone and leaving a gap, Dr. Nicoson replaces the worn-out joint with a precision-engineered implant designed to mimic your natural anatomy.

Benefits of the Touch® Total Thumb CMC Arthroplasty:

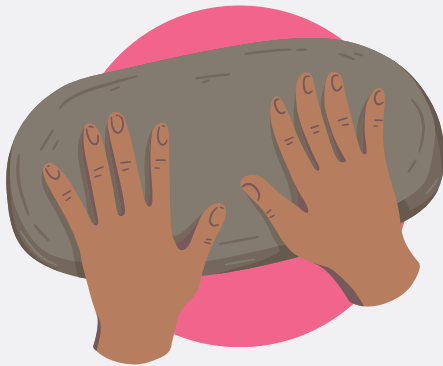
- **Faster Recovery:** Because the bone structure is preserved and reconstructed rather than removed, many patients return to daily activities sooner than with traditional surgery.
- **Restored Pinch Strength:** The implant provides a stable fulcrum, allowing you to pinch and grip with confidence again.
- **Natural Movement:** The "Dual Mobility" design allows the thumb to move freely and naturally, reducing the risk of dislocation.
- **Long-Term Durability:** Designed to last, offering a permanent solution to chronic pain.

Dr. Nicoson's Note: "The goal isn't just to stop the pain; it's to give you your hand back. This procedure is designed to restore the function you need for active living."

7 Thumb Exercises to Do Now for Relief

1. The Thumb Opposition

- Goal: Improve coordination and range of motion.
- Action: Touch the tip of your thumb to the tip of your index finger to make an "O." Open your hand wide. Repeat with the middle, ring, and pinky fingers.



2. The Palm Stretch

- Goal: Stretch the muscles across the palm.
- Action: Rest your hand on a flat surface (table). Gently press your hand flat so the palm touches the table. Hold for 30 seconds.

3. The "C" Shape

- Goal: Maintain the thumb web space.
- Action: Curve your fingers and thumb as if you are holding a soda can. Make the shape of a "C." Hold for 10 seconds, then relax.



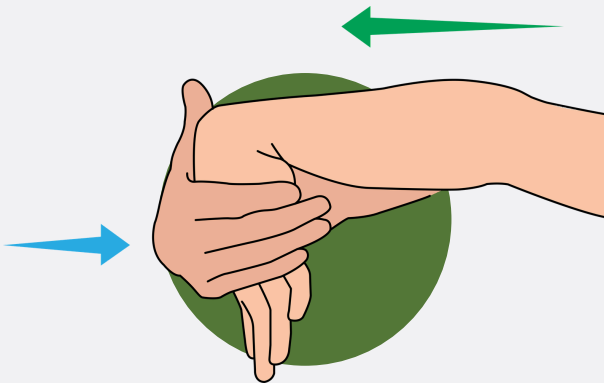
4. Thumb Flexion

- Goal: Stretch the back of the thumb.
- Action: Hold your hand out, palm facing you. Bend your thumb across your palm, trying to touch the base of your pinky finger. Hold for 15 seconds.

7 Thumb Exercises to Do Now for Relief

5. The Tabletop Lift

- Goal: Strengthen the thumb extensor.
- Action: Place your hand flat on a table, palm down. Slowly lift only your thumb off the table as high as comfortably possible. Hold for 2 seconds, then lower.



6. Wrist Flexion/Extension

- Goal: Relieve tension in the connected tendons.
- Action: Hold your arm out straight. Use your other hand to gently bend your wrist down (fingers pointing to floor) and then up (fingers pointing to ceiling).

7. The Soft Squeeze

- Goal: Strengthen gently without joint stress.
- Action: Hold a soft foam ball (or a rolled-up pair of socks). Squeeze gently for 5 seconds, then release. Do not do this if your pain is currently severe.



Don't Let Thumb Pain Dictate Your Day

Exercises and splinting can help manage symptoms, but they cannot fix the bone-on-bone friction of advanced CMC arthritis.

If you are tired of dropping objects, struggling with jars, or waking up with aching hands, it is time to discuss a long-term solution.

Why Choose Dr. Nicoson at Hand and Wrist of Louisville?

Specializing specifically in the complexities of the hand and upper extremity, Dr. Nicoson utilizes the latest advancements in orthopedic technology, including the Touch® Total Thumb CMC Arthroplasty, to ensure you get the best possible outcome.



Ready to Get Your Thumb in Gear?

Schedule your consultation online and get an evaluation from Dr. Nicoson. We can provide a clear solution to chronic thumb pain and arthritis.

Visit www.handandwristlouisville.com to book and find out more information or call (502) 409-6898.

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