

Excision of a Ganglion

What is a Ganglion?

A ganglion is a fluid-filled lump that forms beneath the skin, typically near a joint or tendon.

Your surgeon has recommended surgery to remove the ganglion; however, the decision to proceed is entirely yours. This document provides information about the benefits and risks of the procedure to help you make an informed choice.

If you have any unanswered questions, consult your surgeon or the healthcare team. Once all your concerns are addressed and you decide to proceed, you will be required to sign an informed consent form as the final step in the decision-making process. However, you retain the right to change your decision at any time.

How Does a Ganglion Develop?

Ganglions commonly form near joints, with approximately 75% occurring around the wrist. They may also develop on the ankle or foot.

The ganglion fluid originates from a nearby joint or tendon sheath through a narrow channel. While some ganglions are associated with prior injuries, such as sprains, most develop without an identifiable cause.



A ganglion on a wrist

What are the Benefits of Surgery?

Surgical removal of a ganglion can resolve the lump and alleviate any associated discomfort. It also provides the highest chance of preventing recurrence.

Are There Alternatives to Surgery?

Ganglions often resolve on their own or become less painful over time, typically within one to two years. If the ganglion is not causing significant issues, leaving it untreated is a viable option.

Aspiration, where the fluid is drained using a needle, can temporarily relieve symptoms and confirm the diagnosis. In some cases, a steroid (cortisone) injection may be administered to reduce inflammation. However, these treatments have a high recurrence rate, with the ganglion returning in approximately 60% of cases.

What Happens if I Choose Not to Have Surgery?

In most cases, ganglions are harmless and tend to resolve without intervention. However, if the ganglion compresses a nerve, it can cause pain, numbness, or weakness, making surgical removal the preferred option.

What Does the Operation Involve?

If the ganglion is near your wrist, remove any rings before coming to the hospital.

The healthcare team will conduct several checks to ensure you receive the correct procedure on the correct side. You can assist by confirming your identity and the planned operation with your surgeon and healthcare team.

The procedure can be performed using various anaesthetic techniques, which your anaesthetist will discuss with you. A local anaesthetic may also be administered to manage postoperative pain. The surgery typically takes 15 to 30 minutes.

Some ganglions near the wrist can be removed using arthroscopy (keyhole surgery), but most require an open surgical approach. Your surgeon will carefully separate the ganglion from nearby tendons, nerves, and blood vessels before excising it from its origin. The incision may be slightly larger than expected, as the base of the ganglion may not be directly beneath the lump. The wound is then closed with stitches.

What Should I Do About My Medication?

Inform your healthcare team about all medications you take, including blood thinners, herbal supplements, dietary supplements, and over-the-counter medications. Follow their guidance regarding any necessary adjustments before surgery.

How Can I Prepare for the Operation?

- **Smoking cessation:** Stopping smoking reduces the risk of complications and improves long-term health.

- **Weight management:** Maintaining a healthy weight lowers the risk of postoperative complications.
- **Exercise:** Regular physical activity can help improve recovery and overall health. Seek advice from your GP or healthcare team before starting an exercise routine.
- **Infection prevention:**
 - Avoid shaving or waxing the surgical area in the week before surgery.
 - Take a bath or shower the day before or on the day of the procedure.
 - Keep warm around the time of surgery and inform the healthcare team if you feel cold.
 - If you have diabetes, keep your blood sugar levels well controlled.

Discuss with the healthcare team whether you need any vaccinations to reduce the risk of serious illness during recovery. When in the hospital, practice good hand hygiene and wear a face covering when required.

Potential Complications

The healthcare team will take measures to minimize the risk of complications. The likelihood of complications is based on studies of individuals who have undergone this procedure. Your doctor can provide insight into whether your personal risk is higher or lower.

Some complications can be serious, and it is important to seek clarification from your doctor if anything is unclear. Your anaesthetist will discuss the potential risks associated with anaesthesia.

General Complications of Any Surgery

- **Bleeding** during or after surgery.
- **Infection at the surgical site** (risk: 2 in 1,000). Showering is usually safe after 2 days, but confirm with the healthcare team. Keep the wound dry and covered. Contact the healthcare team if you experience a high temperature, pus discharge, redness, pain, or swelling. Most infections resolve with antibiotics, but in some cases, special dressings or additional surgery may be necessary. Do not take antibiotics unless prescribed.
- **Allergic reactions** to surgical equipment, materials, or medication. The healthcare team is trained to detect and manage such reactions. Inform your doctor of any allergies or past reactions to medications, tests, or dressings.
- **Venous thromboembolism (VTE):** A blood clot in the leg (**deep-vein thrombosis - DVT**) or one that moves to the lung (**pulmonary embolus**). DVT can cause pain, swelling, redness, or prominent veins. The healthcare team will assess your risk and encourage early mobility. You may be given injections, medication, or special stockings to reduce the risk. A pulmonary embolus occurs when the clot travels to the lungs, causing chest pain, shortness of breath, or coughing up blood. Seek immediate medical attention if you develop these symptoms.
- **Chest infection:** The risk is lower if you have stopped smoking and are free from Covid-19 symptoms for at least 7 weeks before surgery.

Specific Complications of This Procedure

- **Arterial damage** (risk: 1 in 10) if the ganglion is located at the front of the wrist, possibly requiring additional surgery.
- **Nerve injury:** Small nerves near the ganglion may be affected, causing numb skin or a painful scar (risk: 7 in 100). This usually improves but can be permanent.
- **Persistent aching or stiffness** at the site of the removed ganglion (risk: 1 in 10, particularly if the ganglion was near the wrist).
- **Complex regional pain syndrome (CRPS):** Severe pain, stiffness, and loss of function in the affected limb (risk: 7 in 100). The cause is unknown. Treatment may include physiotherapy, pain management, and medication. Recovery can take months to years, and in some cases, symptoms may be permanent. Taking vitamin C daily for six weeks post-surgery may help lower the risk.
- **Ganglion recurrence** (risk: 1 in 10), which may occur months or years after surgery.

Expected Outcomes of the Procedure

- **Pain management:** You will receive medication to control pain, and it is essential to take it as prescribed to facilitate movement and recovery.
- **Scarring:** This may be more noticeable if the incision is at the front of the wrist.

Recovery Timeline

In Hospital

After surgery, you will be transferred to the recovery area before moving to the ward. Keeping the affected limb elevated can help reduce swelling. Most patients are discharged the same day, but some may require a longer stay.

If you have any concerns, whether in the hospital or at home, contact the healthcare team for reassurance or treatment of complications.

Resuming Normal Activities

If you had sedation or general anaesthesia and are discharged on the same day:

- A responsible adult should take you home by car or taxi and stay with you for at least 24 hours.
- Stay close to a phone in case of an emergency.
- Avoid driving, operating machinery, or engaging in activities that require coordination (such as cooking) for at least 24 hours or until you fully regain movement and sensation.
- Refrain from signing legal documents or consuming alcohol for at least 24 hours.

The healthcare team will advise when you can resume regular activities. Any joint stiffness should subside quickly.

Keep your wound dry for 4 to 5 days and use a waterproof dressing while bathing. Follow the healthcare team's instructions regarding the removal of stitches or dressing changes.

Engaging in regular physical activity will support your recovery and restore normal function as soon as possible. Consult your healthcare team or GP before starting any exercise routine. Do not drive or cycle until you can safely control your vehicle, including in emergencies. Always verify with the healthcare team and check your insurance policy.

Long-Term Outlook

The scar may remain thick for several months, particularly if located on the front of the wrist. Some patients experience persistent joint aching, often related to underlying joint wear and tear.

Recurrence of the ganglion may occur within months or years following surgery (risk: 1 in 10).

Summary

Ganglions are generally harmless but can be removed if they cause discomfort.

Surgical removal is typically safe and effective, though complications can occur. Understanding potential risks will help you make an informed decision. Early recognition and management of complications can improve outcomes.

Keep this information document for future reference. It may help guide discussions with the healthcare team.

Some risk and complication statistics are derived from global studies or databases. Speak with your surgeon or doctor for more information on risks specific to you, as well as other potential treatment options.

This document is for informational purposes and should not replace medical advice from your healthcare provider.

Professor M. A. Imam
MD, D.SportMed, PhD, FRCS (Tr and Orth)
Subspecialist in Upper limb and Complex trauma reconstruction
Tel: 020 3384 5588
info@thearmdoc.co.uk
www.thearmdoc.co.uk