

# Cubital Tunnel Syndrome



**KRAMES**  
PATIENT EDUCATION

# What Is Cubital Tunnel Syndrome?

Cubital tunnel syndrome is a set of symptoms that may occur if the ulnar nerve in your elbow gets pinched. This may happen if you bend or lean on your elbows often.

## What Are Its Causes?

Many things can cause the ulnar nerve to get pinched. Some of them include:

- Holding a phone to the ear for a long time
- Leaning on elbows for a long time
- Sleeping with arms tightly bent
- A sudden elbow injury
- A past elbow fracture (less frequent)



Bending your elbow as you hold a phone can cause problems over time.

## What Are Its Symptoms?

Symptoms can be minor at first. But they may worsen over time. Common symptoms include:

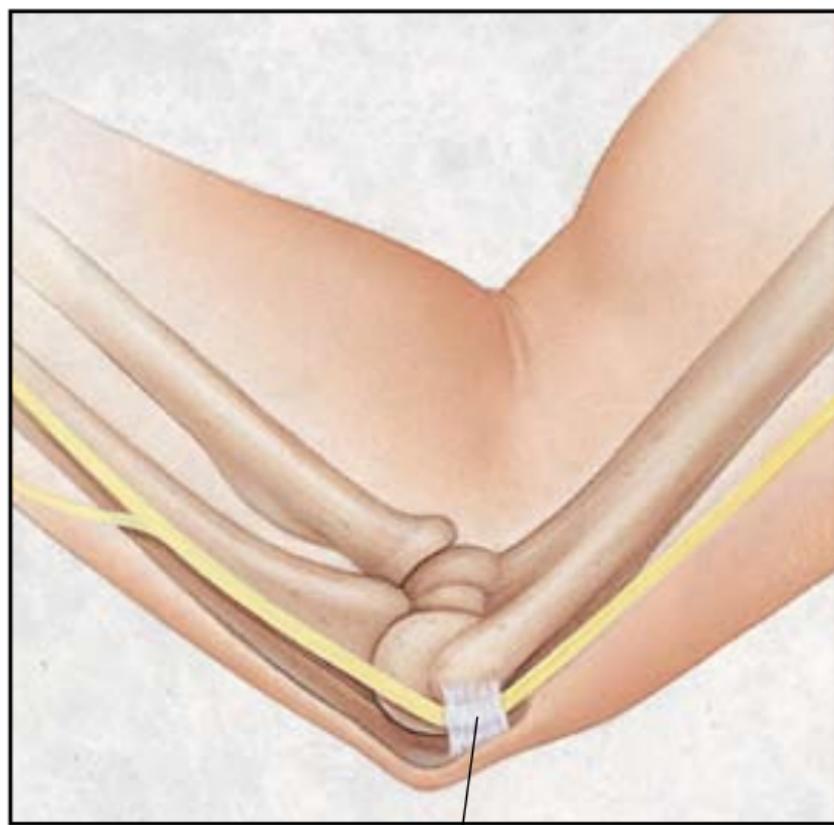
- Numbness or tingling in ring and little fingers
- Loss of finger or hand strength
- Inability to straighten fingers
- Sharp, sudden pain when elbow is touched

# The Cubital Tunnel

The **cubital tunnel** is a groove in a bone near your elbow. This narrow groove provides a passage for the **ulnar nerve**, one of the main nerves in your arm. The ulnar nerve can cause “funny bone” pain if your elbow gets bumped. Your cubital tunnel helps protect this nerve as it passes through your elbow and down to your fingers.

## Compressing the Ulnar Nerve

Bending your elbow compresses the ulnar nerve inside the cubital tunnel. The nerve can get inflamed (irritated) after constant bending and pinching or after getting hurt. Over time, this can lead to pain or numbness. The pain is often felt in your ring and little fingers.



Ulnar nerve in cubital tunnel

# Diagnosis and Treatment

Your doctor will look at your hand and elbow and ask you about your daily tasks. You also may have some tests. Most treatment for cubital tunnel syndrome begins with changing your actions that may have caused the problem.

## Making a Diagnosis

Your work, hobbies, or even how you sleep may be behind your pain. Your doctor will ask about them to help learn what's causing your symptoms. Tests may then be done to rule out other problems and to confirm a diagnosis.

- **Nerve conduction** measures the speed of nerve signals running through your ulnar nerve.
- **Electromyogram (EMG)** testing reveals problems with the muscles in your arm.
- **X-rays** can rule out fractures, arthritis, or other problems that may cause your symptoms.

## Getting Treatment

Rest, medication, and changes in how you do tasks can help you ease pain. You may try:

- Active rest (doing most tasks while finding ways to rest your elbow)
- Taking medication to reduce swelling
- Switching to a headset-style phone
- Using pads under your elbow
- Sleeping with your arm straight
- Wearing a special elbow splint at night



A nerve conduction test can show how quickly your nerve signals travel.



Using a phone headset can help reduce pain.

## **If Surgery Is Needed**

If resting your elbow doesn't work, your doctor may suggest surgery. This shifts the ulnar nerve from the back to the front of the cubital tunnel. Surgery also may remove part of the bone. This can release the nerve from the tunnel. Your doctor will explain the details.

# Preventing Flare-Ups

You can keep cubital tunnel syndrome from flaring up. Avoid pinching the ulnar nerve by keeping your arm straight as much as you can, even while sleeping. And use phone headsets and elbow pads. If you still have pain, tell your doctor.



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