

Get Active. Stay Active

Up a creek with a numb-inducing paddle!

By: Marilyn Gilin, OTR, CHT

Kayaking is my favorite water activity. However, lately my hand has been going numb when I paddle. What could be causing this?

*-Jenny
Grosse Pointe*

If hand numbness is taking the fun out of kayaking, you may be experiencing symptoms of carpal tunnel syndrome.

Carpal tunnel syndrome occurs when tendons or ligaments in the wrist become enlarged, often from inflammation, after being aggravated. The narrowed tunnel of bones and ligaments in the wrist pinches the nerves that reach the fingers and the muscles at the base of the thumb. Symptoms range from a burning, tingling numbness in the fingers, especially the thumb and the index and middle fingers, to difficulty gripping or making a fist, to dropping things.

If you have experienced this numbness for several months or years, you should seek out a hand surgeon. If your numbness only occurs during kayaking or other sports requiring a sustained grasp, you might be able to subdue your symptoms or avoid them altogether by using proper body mechanics.

Certain hand postures tend to aggravate the carpal tunnel region. One posture to avoid is extreme wrist flexion; this motion is sometimes used in paddling the kayak but can be avoided by using feathered paddles and low horizontal paddling technique. Another posture to avoid is sustained pressure at the base of the palm. Proper paddling techniques minimize this pressure. As one hand is pulling the paddle back through the water, the other hand should be pushing the airborne end forward using more push force than the pull force of the other hand. A basic body mechanic rule is to push rather than pull when possible. It is also beneficial to sit up with a slight forward lean and pull using our torso muscles rather than your arm muscles. Your paddling will be more powerful and efficient using the whole body.

To start your stroke, reach forward and rotate your torso allowing for a strong stroke initiation then taper your stroke to gently complete the stroke, giving your muscles a second to relax. Rather than thinking about pulling the paddle through the water, think of the paddle as being stationary and try to pull the kayak past the paddle. This leverage uses all your large muscles including the lower back, abdominals, and thighs. Remember to keep your feet on the foot braces while you paddle. Keep a relaxed grip on the paddle. Tensing your muscles will cause cramping and fatigue. Try to keep your wrist, forearm, and shoulder in a straight line for the pushing part of the stroke. Open your fingers as you push the paddle to help stretch tight forearm muscles.

Stretch your neck and drop your shoulders every few minutes. Tense paddlers tend to shrug their shoulders. Vary your paddling technique slightly through the day, allowing muscles groups to relax.

Kayaking doesn't have to result in hand numbness and tingling. A balanced stroke lets you rest your arms and back while you paddle, and a leveraged stroke means you can paddle strongly with little fatigue.

Please submit questions to our sports medicine experts at Rehabilitation Institute of Michigan by e-mailing cangelel@dmc.org. In the subject line write, "Get Active, Stay Active." We will respond to all the questions we receive and select one each month to feature in our column.

Rehabilitation Institute of Michigan (RIM). RIM has 18 locations throughout southeast Michigan. For more information or to schedule an appointment, contact us at 1-866-4MY-REHAB or www.RIMrehab.org