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My Story; Carpal Tunnel and Ulnar Nerve Damage By Julie Wise

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What exactly is carpal tunnel syndrome? Carpal tunnel syndrome causes numbness or pain in the thumb, index, and middle fingers, and part of the ring finger. It is common in people who use their hands for long periods of time, like assembly line workers or computer users. Repeated bending of the hand or wrist or gripping something very tightly can cause the tendons and sheaths to swell. These then press on the median nerve at the wrist, causing numbness.

Any of these symptoms ring a bell? People who work with polymer clay are also at risk for carpal tunnel syndrome, or ulnar nerve damage.

What is ulnar nerve damage? If you've ever hit your "funny bone," you've really hit your ulnar nerve. That feeling you get that is not so funny when you hit your elbow. It hurts! Inflammation of this nerve is called ulnar neuritis. Ulnar neuritis may occur if this nerve is pressured over the years. It can happen just by leaning heavily on your elbow, by bending your elbow for long periods, or by striking the nerve anywhere from the elbow to the hand. The ulnar nerve also controls your pinkie and half of your ring finger. You may get tingling and numbness in the ring and pinkie fingers.

As a nail technician, design engineer, and now a polymer clay artist, the damage I have inflicted on my precious hands and arms over the years is enormous. Now I am paying for it. Here is my story:

When I was a nail technician, I used to hold my clients' hands, squeezing in a manner that put stress on the carpal tunnel nerve in my left hand. The pain was a gnawing, stabbing pain in the meat of my hand below my thumb. When the pain started, I just ignored it. What can I say, I was young and dumb. After several years, the pain eventually went away. I thought to myself, good, now I don't have to ask my doctor about it. Little did I know how that thought would haunt me later.

Fast forward to last October. My husband and I were moving two new computer desks we had just put together when my left hand slipped and was crunched between them. I bruised my thumb and index finger, but after some Tylenol and an ice pack, I thought my hand would be fine.

The next morning I woke up to find that part of my hand was numb. Over the next four days my hand remained numb, and at night my whole arm would throb with stabbing pains radiating from my elbow to my wrist. My pinkie and ring fingers would swell up to four times their normal size, and I could barely sleep. When I realized the pain was beginning to control my life, I made an appointment to see my doctor.

My doctor took a wait and see approach at first. He prescribed anti-inflammatory drugs, a pain pill, and a wrist brace and told me to come back in two weeks if the pain or numbness persisted. When I went back after two weeks, he prescribed arthritis drugs and told me to come back in a month. During that month, I was eating Tylenol like it was going out of style.

My doctor then ordered an EMG test. In this test, the neurologist uses what looks like a stun gun to zap the different nerves in a patient's hand and arm with electricity. There is also a needles portion of the test that I will not go into, except to say that it doesn't hurt but feels weird and made my hand jump.

After all these tests, the results show that, sure enough, I had extensive ulnar nerve damage, which meant I now needed to see an orthopedic surgeon.

After a month's wait and tons more Tylenol, my appointment-to-see-the-surgeon day arrived. The surgeon first took x-rays to rule out any breaks (none), then tested to see how much feeling I had left in my fingers. Unfortunately, I had lost the protective feeling in most of the hand. This meant I could burn myself badly and not even feel it, or worse. I won't go into the worse. Not good.

The surgeon agreed surgery was in order as soon as possible because now my hand and arm had started to atrophy. The surgeon told me that surgery would be able to alleviate the pain, but that I might still not have any feeling in the ulnar portion of my hand. The procedure in layman's terms is called "releasing the nerve." This was the worst-case scenario, but for me it was good. No feeling, I can live with, but the pain had to go. On the other hand, the best-case scenario was that my hand and arm would return to normal. This was better.

After another month's wait, the big day -- January 31st, 2002 -- arrived! The surgery , scheduled for 7:30 a.m., was an outpatient procedure. Surgery was a breeze and after several hours in recovery, I went home. I saw the doctor four days after the surgery to

check the incisions for infection.. At this time I was given an at-home exercise regime and more pain pills.

Today, it has been three months since the surgery and I am healing slowly. The incisions still hurt and my fingers still swell after working. I suspect it is going to take a lot more time before I am back to normal and claying at full speed.

To minimize the damage to either nerve, I now use gel pads in front of my computer keyboard and mouse to keep my hands and wrists from resting on the sharp edge of my computer desk.. I make sure I am sitting at the proper level so my hands and arms are level with the computer desk and I am not bending my wrists one way or the other.

I also use a long gel pad on my worktable when I clay to avoid resting my arms on the sharp edge of my worktable. Instead of working for hours on end, I now take frequent breaks when I am typing or claying.

In no way do I claim to be a doctor. My only suggestion is if you have any of the signs or symptoms I have described above, go see your own doctor and let him or her take it from there. This article was just simply my story.

To see pictures that were taken four days after surgery and currently what my incisions look like today click on the link below. I will warn you that these pictures are gruesome!

[Surgery Pictures](#)

[Julie Wise](#) owns [WiseCrafts](#), a polymer clay bead and jewelry business, and is the current Vice President of Outreach and Education for the [National Polymer Clay Guild](#).

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