

# Polydactyly (extra digits)



## **What is polydactyly?**

Polydactyly means extra digit(s), which can be on the thumb side of the hand (radial or pre-axial polydactyly), on the little finger side (ulnar or post-axial polydactyly) or centrally in the hand (least common). It affects about 1 in 1000 people.

The extra digits may be small nubbins or fully formed. They may have skin only or may contain bones, tendons and nail. They may be attached to the rest of the hand by a fine stalk or a broad base.

## **Why has my child got polydactyly?**

In many cases of ulnar polydactyly, there is a family tendency for the condition and the child has inherited a particular gene. This is not always the case. In radial polydactyly there is more likely to be a genetic condition causing this and your child will likely be sent for genetic testing.

## **What causes it?**

As the hands form during development, some of the cell signalling mechanisms may become disordered, resulting in the formation of an extra digit.

## **Is there anything else wrong with my child?**

Your paediatrician and surgeon will decide if any further tests need to be done for your child to rule out other abnormalities or conditions.

## **Does it hurt?**

No, this is not a painful condition. Sometimes the extra digits can get in the way though.

## **Will my child be able to use their hand normally?**

Children are very good at adapting to what is normal for them and will likely use their hand totally normally or even not notice the extra digit. After surgery, they will continue to use their hand as before and it will look more normal.

## **How is it treated?**

- For ulnar polydactyly - where the stalk attaching the extra digit to the hand is very fine - it can be clipped off soon after birth and the extra digit allowed to fall off over a couple of weeks. If the stalk is thicker, your surgeon will have to perform a small operation to remove the extra finger safely.
- In the case of fingers that are fully joined onto the hand, the surgery is more complex, so would be performed later on when your baby is a little bigger.
- For radial polydactyly, often portions of each of the two thumbs need to be combined to make a useful and normal looking thumb. This again is more complex, so is performed when your baby is nearly a year old.

## **Why might surgery be delayed after birth?**

Ideally, more complex surgery is performed a few months after birth when your baby is bigger, making both the technical aspects of operating and anaesthetising your child easier and safer. We also like to get your child's hand back to normal as soon as possible so that they learn to use it properly. The balance between these factors is weighed for each individual child and their family. In the case of polydactyly, surgery is often performed at the age of about one year.

## **How should I explain this condition to family and friends?**

You can give them a copy of this leaflet and tell them that polydactyly is a common congenital hand condition which is dealt with early in life. Here in Cornwall we have a team of 3 specialist Hand Surgeons who have had training to treat this condition.

## **Any questions?**

Please contact one of the hand surgeons via the secretary on 01872 253438.

If you would like this leaflet in large print, braille, audio version or in another language, please contact the General Office on 01872 252690

