

One Glass Artist Story...

*Healing a repetitive strain injury is not just a one-time visit...
it is a life time of maintenance!*

This story was sent to me via email from an Artist suffering with carpal tunnel syndrome + more as you will read. You may know someone like this or you may even be this Artist. I have received many stories like this...it is not an uncommon story - just suffered in silence not knowing where to turn.

I am a 51 year old glass artist working in various medium in glass art. My initial experience with carpal tunnel like symptoms came from sandblasting glass just a few years ago. I noticed that when I would cut designs into a rubber resist with an exacto knife that my fingers were going numb, especially the pinky finger. I happened to be in physical therapy at the time for a long time scapula/shoulder problem and mentioned the numbness in passing to the therapist.

That was very fortunate, because I had no clue that this could be carpal tunnel or for that matter, anything serious at all. I am normally very educated about health issues but had only seen carpal tunnel referring to typists and did not realize that I was at risk. He brought it to the physiatrist's attention and they both agreed that it probably was not carpal tunnel, since the pinky was involved. Being somewhat of a friend, the doctor decided to do a nerve conduction study to rule out carpal tunnel. We were amazed to discover that I had carpal tunnel in both hands.

I believe this was the result of sandblasting with a siphon pot and trigger gun for several hours. The gun requires a constant squeezing and it is also very heavy since a very thick hose hangs down from it. In blasting, the arm is bent at an angle, sweeping back and forth. I was alternating between hands.

Both the therapist and the doctor were very much against surgery because of all the failures they had seen and needed to treat. They started me on an exercise routine, along with rest and ice. Being an artist, my hands are my creative outlet and something I did not want to jeopardize. I religiously exercised my hands and arms and quit working for a short period of time. I wore a brace whenever I had the symptoms.

I was able to keep my symptoms under control but found that working with flat pieces of glass, carving them and turning them over in my left hand to check the depth of glass carving, was very irritating to the wrist and to the ligaments alongside the knuckles. I had injured these areas doing yard work. Due to the nature of my work, it was a difficult area to heal. I finally had to tape three fingers together and refrain from blasting these flat pieces. This has left a weakness in my hands and had caused me to discontinue working with these types of pieces.

I now work on glass vases and bowls, carving, etching and painting them. Glass is a very heavy medium, and I still have problems maneuvering these large, heavy pieces, due to hand and wrist problems. Airbrushing also causes nerve compression pain, especially in the C8 dermatome, and I am trying to find an ergonomic solution to this problem. This requires a pencil-type grip, pressing on a small trigger with the index finger, while the arm is bent at the elbow.

I have developed thoracic outlet syndrome-like symptoms and believe this to be from exercise and yoga. However, there is a possibility that wearing an air supplied hood, which is very heavy and drags off the right side of the neck could be the cause or at least adding to the situation. I have had swelling in the clavicular area of my neck, with numbness and tingling in my right arm along with nerve pain and pain and loss of mobility in my neck. I wake up in the middle of the night with numbness in my hands and arms. I am dealing with shoulder impingement and have been doing physical rehab and myofascial release for several months, with very little improvement. I have also had two series of trigger point injections with lidocaine.

Being a glass artist seems to have its challenges every step of the way. I have changed from doing large pieces of flat glass with intricate designs to smaller carved flat pieces to working on bowls and vases. I have tried to limit the cutting with the exacto knife, the time spent in the blasting booth wearing the air supplied hood and working with lifting heavy glass. I feel that my creativity with glass is challenged at almost every turn.

Now I am dealing with poor posture from "hunching" over my work, whether sitting or standing. I have raised my work area and try to take many little short breaks. It is very easy to lose oneself in the creative process and work nonstop. This is not good for the body. I am also realizing that keeping a bend in the elbow for long periods of time can contribute to these problems.

I believe that there is not enough information out there for people with occupations such as mine to realize that they are at risk for some of these commonly stereotyped injuries. My son is a guitarist and is well aware of his risk, however, I feel the art profession is just now starting to educate artists of these same risks.

Could this be you? There is a non-invasive solution. Please read my book and others as they will answer your questions and I hope, help to restore your hands and upper body to a place you can work without pain.

With Blessings...Kate'