

## A light at the end of the tunnel

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*By Elizabeth Cloutman / Town Crier Staff Writer*

Low-level laser light therapy may alleviate carpal tunnel syndrome

Numbness, tingling or weakness in the hands, sometimes accompanied by pain that radiates up to the elbow. If you've experienced these symptoms, you might be among the thousands who suffer from carpal tunnel syndrome.

Chris Watson, a Mountain View chiropractor, has recently begun to offer low-level laser therapy as a treatment that may be effective in alleviating the symptoms of carpal tunnel syndrome.

Watson was one of the participants in a seven-month double-blind study, recently conducted by the Food and Drug Administration, to determine the effectiveness of low-level laser therapy in treating carpal tunnel syndrome, as well as in a seven-year study on its use in managing other types of chronic pain. The FDA recently approved the therapy, which may be effective in reducing the tissue inflammation that causes the symptoms of carpal tunnel syndrome. Baylor University School of Medicine in Houston and General Motors in Flint, Mich., were also among those involved in the FDA studies, Watson said.

"In the seven years I've been using the laser light treatment, I've not had one adverse reaction," Watson said. "I've been able to use it on the neck, elbows, on athletic injuries, strains and sprains ... In treating patients with carpal tunnel syndrome, it will vary from person to person. Most patients tend to notice changes the first or second treatment. The more severe the syndrome, the longer it takes." He added that studies had shown the treatment to be highly effective among auto assembly workers.

Watson explained that carpal tunnel syndrome is caused by an inflammation of the flexor tendons that go through the carpal ligament that binds them together. The medial nerve also passes through the same area and can be squeezed by the inflamed tendons, causing pain, numbness and weakness in the hands. Carpal tunnel syndrome usually occurs as the result of repetitive actions, such as those in meat and poultry processing, and automobile assembly lines.

Many people sit for long hours at computer keyboards now that computer workstations are common in the workplace.

This has been a major cause of the increase in carpal tunnel syndrome cases.

Watson uses a laser instrument that looks like a small flashlight - one that costs about \$10,000, he noted.

The instrument emits laser light that penetrates three to five centimeters into the tissues.

He holds the instrument against the skin on the parts of the wrist and hand involved in the inflammation, moving it from place to place in timed intervals.

Treating one hand takes about 10-15 minutes, and a patient generally feels no discomfort or sensation of heat.

The treatment is also known as "cold" laser therapy. Watson explained that scientific studies have shown the infrared light used in low-level laser treatment seems to stimulate the lymphatic system to reabsorb the fluids that cause the swelling in tissue injury.

Watson noted that many health-care insurance policies cover the low-level laser treatment.

Other treatments for carpal tunnel syndrome include wearing wrist splints to immobilize the wrist; applying heat and/or ice, anti-inflammatory medication, physical therapy, ultrasound and outpatient arthroscopic surgery on the carpal ligament to reduce pressure on the irritated tendons and medial nerve.

Watson said he refers a carpal tunnel patient to a physician for an electromyelogram, a test of nerve conductivity, if the patient has not responded well to a series of treatments.

"In the later phases (of carpal tunnel syndrome, surgery may be indicated if a brief series of treatments doesn't reduce symptoms," he said.

Watson noted that someone in the early stages of the syndrome who has symptoms lasting more than two months and has a job involving repetitive motion would probably find relief through low-level laser treatment.

The Watson Chiropractic and Scoliosis Center is located at 2425 California St. in Mountain View. To make an appointment, call 969-1032. For more information on low-level laser treatment, logon to [watsonchiropractic.us](http://watsonchiropractic.us).