# Episode Book

EPISODE #5589

# Hand-Arm Vibration Syndrome: What Cheap Power Tools Cost

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## SYNOPSIS

Hand-arm vibration syndrome (HAVS) is a collection of vascular, sensorineural, and musculoskeletal injuries caused by years of gripping vibrating power tools — and it has no cure. This episode unpacks what HAVS actually is, what it feels like, who's most at risk (from plaster-cast workers to dental technicians to harvesting farmers), and why the official case numbers miss thousands of people. Along the way: why HAVS gets misdiagnosed as carpal tunnel, why surgery doesn't fix it, and why the tools that cause it are cheaper and more widespread than ever.

# TRANSCRIPT



**Corn**

Here's the question that's been rattling around my head since Daniel sent this in. If you hand a man a tool that does the work of ten men, and it costs less than a week's wages, what exactly did he just buy?



**Herman**

That's the whole thing in one line, isn't it.



**Corn**

Daniel wrote in about exactly that. He said the arrival of cheap, widely available power tools changed how construction gets done, but it also introduced new problems for how the body handles sustained exertion. And the case he wants us to look at is hand-arm vibration syndrome.



**Herman**

HAVS.



**Corn**

He asked four things. What it actually is. What symptoms it causes. Who ends up at risk. And what treatments exist today. That's the shape of the episode.



**Herman**

Good. Because the answer to the last one is going to annoy people.



**Corn**

Let's start with the basics. What is this thing, and why does it happen?



**Herman**

HAVS is not one disease. That's the first thing to get straight. It's a collection of symptoms in the hands caused by repeated vibration trauma, and it splits into three families. Vascular, sensorineural, and musculoskeletal. The HSE's own definition treats it as all three at once, which is why the older name, vibration white finger, was always too narrow.



**Corn**

Three separate injuries that happen to arrive together.



**Herman**

They arrive together and they progress at different rates. The vascular part is the one everybody recognises. Episodic blanching of the fingers. They go white, usually triggered by cold. That's secondary Raynaud's phenomenon, and in this context it's called vibration-induced white finger.



**Corn**

And the white isn't the injury. The white is the visible part.



**Herman**

Right. What's happening underneath is that the small blood vessels in the fingers have stopped responding properly to cold. A normal hand constricts and then reopens. A HAVS hand constricts and stays constricted. The finger goes white, then blue, then red as the blood eventually comes back, and the return is painful.



**Corn**

The sensorineural side.



**Herman**

Numbness and tingling, intermittent at first, then persistent. Reduced sensory perception, so people can't feel small objects properly. Reduced manipulative dexterity. And then the musculoskeletal piece, which is the one people forget, because it isn't in the fingers. It's impaired grip strength, osteoarthritis in the wrist and elbow, bone necrosis, Dupuytren's contracture, where the tissue in the palm thickens and pulls the fingers down.



**Corn**

So a hand that can't feel, can't warm up, and can't grip.



**Herman**

And none of it announces itself. That's the characteristic that matters most. Early symptoms are non-specific. Tingling fingers after a shift. Cold hands in winter. Everybody has that. So it gets dismissed, by the worker and often by the doctor, and by the time someone seeks care properly, significant irreversible damage has typically already happened.



**Herman**

It's the whole sentence. There's no cure. Everything we're going to talk about for the next twenty minutes is management, not reversal.



**Corn**

Give me the scale, because I want to know whether this is a niche problem or a mass one.



**Herman**

Both, depending on which number you trust. In Great Britain in 2024, two hundred and twenty new HAVS cases were assessed for Industrial Injuries Disablement Benefit. That's the official count.



**Corn**

Two hundred and twenty.



**Herman**

Now compare that to a survey from the late nineties, the Medical Research Council, which estimated two hundred and eighty-eight thousand people in Great Britain had vibration white finger. Two hundred and fifty-five thousand of them men.



**Corn**

So the official number and the survey number differ by three orders of magnitude.



**Herman**

They're measuring different things. One is people who got through a compensation assessment. The other is people who have the condition. But a gap that wide tells you something is broken in the reporting.



**Corn**

What actually happens inside the hand? Because I want the mechanism, and I suspect you're about to tell me nobody fully knows it.



**Herman**

Nobody fully knows it. A 2024 review in Toxicology and Industrial Health described the pathological mechanism as largely unknown, and proposed two families of explanation. One is immunological, damage to the vessel walls driven by an immune response. The other is neural, a defective response in the nerve endings themselves. Probably both, in some proportion we haven't worked out.



**Corn**

That's remarkable. This has been a recognised occupational disease for over a century and the mechanism is still open.



**Herman**

It's a disease of the small vessels and the fine nerve endings, and those are hard to biopsy and hard to image in a living hand. So the research has lagged. What we can say is that sustained vibration physically traumatises the tissue. The hand is being shaken at high frequency for hours a day, and the structures that suffer first are the ones with the smallest diameter.



**Corn**

The capillaries and the nerve endings.



**Herman**

And the cold response is where the vascular damage shows itself, because that's a system already operating near its limits. Cooke and Lawson wrote about cold intolerance as a recognised feature, and it's often the thing patients complain about most, because it doesn't stay at work. It follows them home.



**Corn**

What does it feel like? Not the clinical description, the actual experience.



**Herman**

There's a case report from 2024 of a thirty-nine-year-old dental technician. Five years of exposure. Presented with three years of chronic wrist pain, numbness and tingling, finger pain provoked by cold, and poor grip strength.



**Corn**

A dental technician.



**Herman**

Not a road worker. She's using handpieces all day, small rotary tools, and five years was enough.



**Corn**

Three years of symptoms before she presents.



**Herman**

Which tells you she was dismissing it for three years. And that's the normal pattern, not the exception.



**Corn**

Give me the plaster-cast worker, because I think that one's the sharpest example.



**Herman**

Chesterfield Royal Hospital. A plaster-cast worker with more than twenty-five years in the job, diagnosed with advanced stage three vascular and sensorineural HAVS. She's been off work since October 2023.



**Corn**

Stage three is the top of the scale.



**Herman**

Stage three vascular means frequent episodes of blanching across most of the fingers. Stage three sensorineural means reduced sensation and reduced dexterity that interferes with daily life.



**Corn**

And her quote, which I want to read properly, because it's the line that makes this real. She said, "I never, for one minute, suspected that the issues I was experiencing were being caused by the tools I used in my workplace."



**Herman**

And she goes on. "I was never given any information on the risks of HAVS and I knew nothing about the potential symptoms." Then she describes daily life. "Every aspect of daily life is impacted due to the numbness, weakness, pins-and-needles in my fingers and hands."



**Corn**

Twenty-five years of using tools, and nobody told her.



**Herman**

Nobody told her. That's not a knowledge gap in the literature. That's a knowledge gap between the literature and the person holding the tool.



**Corn**

Now, here's the thing I want to press on, because I think most listeners will hear "numb fingers" and think carpal tunnel. How different are they?



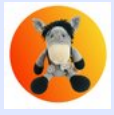
**Herman**

They can look almost identical on presentation. Numbness, tingling, weakness, worse at night, worse in the cold. And they're different conditions requiring different treatment.



**Corn**

And the difference matters clinically, not just academically.



**Herman**

It matters enormously. Carpal tunnel syndrome is a compression problem. The median nerve is being squeezed as it passes through the wrist, and you can relieve that surgically by cutting the ligament and giving the nerve room. HAVS is not a compression problem. It's diffuse damage to vessels and nerve endings throughout the hand.



**Corn**

So the operation doesn't help.



**Herman**

The operation doesn't help, and Pelmear and Taylor made the point explicitly back in 1994 that surgery is contraindicated in HAVS. You can decompress a nerve that isn't the problem and leave the patient with the same symptoms plus a scar.



**Corn**

That's the part that should worry people. A worker gets a carpal tunnel diagnosis, gets the release, and nothing changes, because the actual disease was never addressed.



**Herman**

And that's a real pathway to years of misdirected treatment. Which is why the staging matters, and why it's worth knowing that the staging system itself is contested.



**Corn**

So that's what it is and what it feels like. Now let's talk about who actually ends up with it, and why the numbers we have are almost certainly wrong.



**Herman**

The at-risk list is longer than most people expect. Anyone using hand-held, hand-fed, or hand-guided power tools. Construction, mining, forestry, road work, foundries. But also dentistry and dental laboratories. And agriculture.



**Corn**

Agriculture is the one that surprises me.



**Herman**

A cross-sectional study across twenty villages in Pakistan looked at harvesting farmers. Fifty-seven percent reported hand vibration. Fifty-four percent numbness. Forty-three percent Raynaud's phenomenon. Forty-three percent musculoskeletal discomfort. Twenty-six percent tingling. Twenty-two percent carpal tunnel syndrome.



**Corn**

Fifty-seven percent.



**Herman**

In a population where you would not describe the work as industrial. They're using powered harvesters, brush cutters, chainsaws, small engines, and the exposure accumulates.



**Corn**

And the historic tool-by-tool numbers?



**Herman**

Griffin's Handbook of Human Vibration, 1990, which is still the reference point. Prevalence of vibration white finger by tool category ranged from roughly twenty percent to one hundred percent. The high end is percussive metalworking, pneumatic hammers, that kind of thing.



**Corn**

One hundred percent.



**Herman**

In some tool categories, essentially everyone using them developed it. Which is why the phrase "legacy disease" gets used, and why it's misleading. The tools that caused that are still being sold. They're just cheaper now.



**Corn**

That's the paradox in Daniel's prompt, isn't it. The tools got affordable, which is good, and the exposure got distributed to people who have no idea they're being exposed.



**Herman**

A dental technician in a small practice is not covered by the same safety culture as a worker on a major construction site. There's no toolbox talk. There's no occupational health nurse. There's a handpiece and a deadline.



**Corn**

Let's talk about who's being missed, because there's a data point here that I found striking.



**Herman**

Of two thousand eight hundred and sixty HAVS cases assessed for Industrial Injuries Disablement Benefit between 2015 and 2024, five were women.



**Corn**

Five.



**Herman**

Five. Now, some of that is real exposure pattern. Construction and forestry are heavily male. But it can't explain dental laboratories, it can't explain agriculture, and it can't explain plaster-cast work in an NHS hospital, which is where the Chesterfield case came from.



**Corn**

So either women are barely exposed, which the case reports contradict, or the assessment pathway is missing them.



**Herman**

The likelier reading is that women in these roles are less likely to be in a workplace with formal health surveillance, less likely to have the condition attributed to work, and less likely to pursue a compensation claim. Which means the official data isn't just under-counting. It's under-counting unevenly.



**Corn**

How is it actually diagnosed?



**Herman**

The standard is the Stockholm Workshop Scale. It splits vascular from sensorineural. Vascular grades one v to three v, sensorineural one s n to three s n. Usually combined with the Griffin blanching score, which is a way of quantifying how much of the finger goes white and how often.



**Corn**

And there's a newer system.



**Herman**

There is. The International Consensus Criteria, proposed by Poole and colleagues in 2019. It's more granular, and a lot of researchers prefer it. The HSE has not adopted it. Its 2019 guidance still points to Stockholm.



**Corn**

So the field has a newer, better instrument and the regulator is using the older one.



**Herman**

Which is a live disagreement, not a settled question. The Society of Occupational Medicine recommends keeping Stockholm plus Griffin as the standard, so it's not unanimous on either side.



**Corn**

Now the diagnostic gap, because this is where I think the episode earns its keep.



**Herman**

A 2025 study looked at two hundred and twenty-five vibration-exposed workers and compared the Rydel-Seiffer tuning fork, which is the cheap bedside test used in health surveillance, against quantitative sensory testing, which is the thorough version.



**Corn**

And the tuning fork did badly.



**Herman**

Sensitivity between thirty and sixty-one percent. Specificity between ninety-one and ninety-four percent.



**Corn**

Translate that.



**Herman**

It's good at telling you when someone is fine. It's bad at catching someone who isn't. If the tuning fork says you're clear, you're probably clear. If the tuning fork says nothing's wrong and something is, it misses it between forty and seventy percent of the time.



**Corn**

So health surveillance is giving people a clean bill of health they haven't earned.



**Herman**

That's the implication, and it's a serious one. The whole logic of surveillance is that you catch it early and remove the person from exposure before the damage is irreversible. If the test misses most cases, the surveillance programme is producing reassurance without protection.



**Corn**

Which brings us to treatment. And I want to be clear with listeners that we're about to describe management, not cure.



**Herman**

There is no cure. Every source I looked at frames it the same way. Reduce or eliminate vibration exposure, avoid cold, stop smoking, and manage the symptoms with medication.



**Corn**

Why smoking?



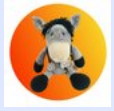
**Herman**

Because nicotine is a vasoconstrictor. You're already dealing with blood vessels that over-constrict. Smoking makes the underlying problem worse.



**Corn**

First-line drug.



**Herman**

Slow-release calcium channel blockers. Nifedipine is the usual one. They relax the smooth muscle in the vessel walls and improve peripheral circulation, which reduces the frequency and severity of the blanching episodes.



**Corn**

Second line.



**Herman**

Sildenafil, off-label, and iloprost, which is unlicensed for this. Iloprost is a synthetic prostacyclin analogue. It's given as a six-hour infusion, daily, for five days, usually under rheumatology supervision.



**Corn**

Six hours a day for five days. That's not a pill you take with breakfast.



**Herman**

It's a serious intervention for a serious problem, and it's used for the vascular side specifically. It doesn't touch the nerve damage.



**Corn**

So what's the prognosis? If I've got this, what does my future look like?



**Herman**

There's a Finnish cohort. Two hundred and forty-one HAVS patients, of whom a hundred and forty-nine responded, followed about eight and a half years after diagnosis. About a third reported improvement in both the vascular and sensorineural symptoms.



**Corn**

A third improve.



**Herman**

A third improve, which is more than you'd expect from a condition described as irreversible, and it's worth understanding why. Once exposure stops, the vascular component has some capacity to recover. The nerve damage is much less forgiving.



**Corn**

And what predicts improvement?



**Herman**

Younger age and shorter exposure. Which is the entire argument for early detection in one sentence. The people who do best are the ones who got out soonest.



**Corn**

And the two-thirds who don't improve?



**Herman**

Persistent symptoms, and that's linked to lowered work ability and lowered quality of life. There's a qualitative study from 2017 where patients described it as a disability, and described a real lack of support to manage the symptoms. They talked about using risky strategies to cope, which is a polite way of saying they keep working through it because stopping isn't financially available to them.



**Corn**

Now here's the number that I think is the real story of this episode. The official case count over time.



**Herman**

HAVS cases assessed for Industrial Injuries Disablement Benefit. Twelve hundred and ten in 2010. Eighty in 2020.



**Corn**

A ninety-three percent fall.



**Herman**

Then it rebounds. Three hundred in 2021. Three hundred in 2022. Two hundred and fifteen in 2023. Two hundred and twenty in 2024.



**Corn**

So the collapse and the rebound are both artifacts.



**Herman**

The collapse lines up with a period when the assessment process was disrupted, and the rebound lines up with it coming back. What you're looking at is a measure of how many people got through a compensation pipeline, not how many people got sick. And we know that, because the prevalence surveys say hundreds of thousands, and the HSE itself acknowledges under-reporting.



**Corn**

So when someone says HAVS is declining, the honest answer is that we don't know, because we're not measuring it.



**Herman**

We're measuring claims. Claims are a function of awareness, of legal support, of whether there's a union rep in the building. None of which has anything to do with how much vibration a hand absorbed.



**Corn**

Which brings us to the law, and to Chesterfield.



**Herman**

The Control of Vibration at Work Regulations 2005 set an exposure action value and an exposure limit value. Above the action value, the employer has to take action. Above the limit value, you're not supposed to be exposed at all.



**Corn**

And in January of this year, the HSE prosecuted Chesterfield Royal Hospital NHS Foundation Trust.



**Herman**

Fined forty thousand pounds plus four thousand nine hundred and eleven pounds in costs. Several employees had developed HAVS and carpal tunnel syndrome. The plaster-cast worker we discussed was one of them. The Trust pleaded guilty to breaching Section 2(1) of the Health and Safety at Work Act.



**Corn**

The inspector's line is worth having on the record.



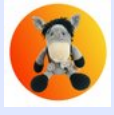
**Herman**

Muir Finlay said the fine should underline to all employers that expose their workers to vibration that the courts and HSE take failures to follow the regulations extremely seriously.



**Corn**

Which is a fine of forty thousand pounds for a condition that has taken a woman out of work permanently.



**Herman**

And that's the tension in the whole regulatory picture. The regulations exist. The exposure values are defined. The prosecution happened. And the outcome, measured against a career and a pair of hands, is a rounding error in a Trust's budget.



**Corn**

That's the clinical picture. But there's a human picture underneath it that the research papers can't quite capture.



**Hilbert**

You keep saying "exposure."



**Corn**

Sorry?



**Hilbert**

"Exposure." Like it's weather. I ran a hand grinder for eight hours a day for about eleven months in the late eighties. Concrete finisher's assistant. I wasn't the guy running the screed. I was the guy smoothing the edges afterward, because the company wouldn't buy the bigger machine that did it in one pass. It cost about four thousand pounds and they decided against it.



**Herman**

Four thousand pounds.



**Hilbert**

That's what the grinder cost. So instead they paid me, and I stood there with a seven-inch grinder and did the edges by hand. Eight hours. Every day. My fingers would go white in the cold for years afterward. Not at the time. Years afterward. I'd be standing at a bus stop in February and look down and two of them would just be white.



**Corn**

And nobody said anything.



**Hilbert**

Nobody said anything. Foreman didn't. Safety man didn't. There was a safety man, he came round once a month and looked at the scaffolding. Vibration wasn't on his list.



**Herman**

When did you find out what it was called?



**Hilbert**

Years later. I was getting treated for something else entirely, a shoulder thing, and the physio asked me whether I'd ever worked with vibrating tools. I said yes. She asked whether I'd ever had the fingers going white. I said no.



**Corn**

You said no.



**Hilbert**

I said no. Because I didn't want it in my file. If it's in your file, you're the guy with the hands. You don't get put on the good jobs after that. You get put on the jobs where it doesn't matter if you're slow.



**Herman**

So the record says you were fine.



**Hilbert**

The record says I was fine. And there's a few thousand other blokes whose records say the same thing. That's your under-reporting. It isn't that nobody asked. It's that we all knew the right answer.



**Corn**

The thing I keep coming back to is that you knew the term. You knew what it was and you still said no.



**Hilbert**

I knew the term because she used it. I didn't know it before. Nobody on that crew knew it. We called it white fingers. That was the whole vocabulary.



**Herman**

And the tools are still being sold.



**Hilbert**

The tools are still being sold, and they're cheaper now than they were then, and they're being bought by blokes doing a bathroom refit who've never heard either word for it. It isn't a legacy disease. It's a disease of whoever's holding the cheap tool this week. That's all it's ever been.



**Corn**

So if the mechanism is still largely unknown, and the standard surveillance test misses somewhere between forty and seventy percent of cases, what does that actually mean for the thousands of people holding a grinder right now?



**Herman**

It means the detection system is weaker than the exposure system. We know how to measure vibration. There are accelerometers, there are exposure values, there's a whole methodology for working out how many metres per second squared a hand is absorbing over an eight-hour shift. We're good at the tool side.



**Corn**

And bad at the hand side.



**Herman**

Which is the strange asymmetry here. We can tell you precisely how much vibration a particular grinder puts out. We cannot reliably tell you whether the person who used it for five years has the disease.



**Corn**

There was a mention of blood biomarkers in that review.



**Herman**

Early work. Endothelin-1 and calcitonin rose after a work shift, CCL20 fell. There's a signal there. It's nowhere near a diagnostic test, and I'd be careful not to oversell it, but it's the direction that would actually change things, because a blood test could be run before symptoms and before the damage is permanent.



**Corn**

The staging question. The International Consensus Criteria exists and the HSE hasn't adopted it.



**Herman**

That's a decision that could change, and it matters more than it sounds. If your staging system understates severity, you understate the case for intervention, and you understate the compensation. The instrument you measure with shapes what you're allowed to see.



**Corn**

HAVS is a disease of progress. The tools got better and cheaper, and the bodies using them paid a price we're still learning to measure.



**Herman**

The price is invisible for exactly long enough that nobody has to pay it except the person holding the tool.



**Corn**

If you found this useful, a review helps other people find the show.



**Herman**

Our producer is Hilbert Flumingtop. This has been My Weird Prompts.



**Corn**

You can find everything at my weird prompts dot com, or email us at show at my weird prompts dot com.



**Herman**

We'll be back soon.