

Thumb Ulna Collateral Ligament

skiers thumb / game keepers thumb

Introduction

Game Keeper's Thumb



This is an injury to the ulnar collateral ligament of the metacarpo-phalangeal joint. This is a ligament that supports the thumb particularly on pinching or gripping. The ligament can be damaged if the thumb is forced away from your hand (e.g. if your hand is hit with a ball, or you fall while skiing). This is why a UCL injury is sometimes called *skier's thumb*.

If it is damaged it may cause a chronic instability of the thumb which causes problems with function. People with this problem may experience of a loss of strength when pinching or gripping with the thumb.

Symptoms

Following injury, the thumb maybe swollen, bruised and painful. Treatment frequently consists of a period of immobilisation in a cast or removable splint. Sometimes your consultant may feel it is necessary to perform a surgical repair of the ligament.

The method of treatment chosen depends whether the ligament is partly or completely torn and whether the ligament has moved into a position where healing may not be possible. An ultrasound sometimes help answer these questions, but is not always required. This decision may be possible with a gentle examination if the thumb is not too swollen and painful, though a small amount of local anaesthesia can be injected around the thumb to facilitate examination without pain. An X-ray is often used to ensure there is no fracture of a small fragment of bone which the ligament is attached to. Occasionally a bony injury can help healing, but the specialist treating you will explain why and if this is the case.

PATIENT INFORMATION LEAFLET

Immobilisation

If the two ends of the torn ligament are not widely apart on an ultrasound, or the impression is this is a partial tear, then a splint or cast is usually worn for 4 weeks full time. A further 4 weeks is then recommended with a removable splint to protect the hand in function, but allow some movement to prevent stiffness. A programme of exercises is used to get the thumb moving again. It can take several months for the movement and the strength to return.

Surgery

If the ligament is repaired, this is followed by a similar period of splinting and an exercise programme. Surgery is usually performed as a day-case procedure under a regional block anaesthesia (where you remain awake, but your arm is temporarily paralysed and you feel no pain during the operation and for several hours afterwards). This is a safer form of anaesthesia, and the aim is to restore the stability of the thumb. The ligament (and bone) maybe repaired using stitches (suture), a special bone anchor (similar to a raw plug used for home DIY), metal screws or plates depending on the exact type of injury seen during surgery. A period of immobilisation is quite common despite treatment with surgery and can be up to 4 weeks.

Hand Therapy

You may require therapy if your movement does not improve with exercises alone. Hand Therapy can help regain strength and prevent stiffness following immobilisation. For some patients it is recommended to use a splint to support the thumb after this type of injury when undertaking sport or heavy activity. Your treating surgeon or therapist can advise on this.

How long will I be off work and when can I drive?

You can start driving again once you can make a full pain free fist with your affected hand, grip the wheel and perform an emergency stop manoeuvre without any distracting pain. Returning to work will vary depending on if you do light or heavy work. It is not uncommon to need a minimum of 4 weeks before returning to driving or work, but your treating clinician will advise you further about both these queries.

Complications

- Wound infection
- Injury to nerve, blood vessel or tendon
- Scar tenderness
- Non Union
- Stiffness
- Instability of the joint
- Failure of repair
- A pain syndrome



PATIENT INFORMATION LEAFLET

Further information

The day surgery unit can be contacted on 02476 966861 / 02476 966868 (University Hospital), or on 01788 663264 (Hospital of St. Cross). For further information please visit our hand service's web site at www.tinyurl.com/uhcwhand, or contact:

- Hand Therapy at University Hospital Coventry & Warwickshire on 02476 966016
- Hand Therapy at Hospital of St. Cross, Rugby on 01788 663257
- Our specialist hand surgery nurse / hand-coordinator on 02476 965072

The Trust has access to interpreting and translation services. If you need this information in another language or format please contact 02476 966861 and we will do our best to meet your needs.

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Document History

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