

Virtual fracture clinic

Finger dislocations

Information for patients

What is a finger dislocation?

Movement of the fingers occurs at the joints between the small bones. The bones are held in place by strong ligaments which encircle the bones and control the direction of movement when the tendons and muscles contract. These ligaments can be overstretched and some of the fibres may tear when the finger unexpectedly contacts a firm object or is suddenly twisted. If the joint is disrupted and the bones are no longer in contact with each other this is termed a 'finger dislocation'.

In some cases the ligament can tear off a small piece of bone when the dislocation occurs. This is termed an 'avulsion fracture'.

Finger dislocations usually occur in the middle joint (the proximal interphalangeal joint - PIP joint) of the fingers although occasionally they can also occur at the other finger joints.



What causes a finger dislocation?

Finger dislocations are usually caused by an unexpected force through the finger. This might be through contact with the ground or an object such as a ball, or if the finger is caught on an object or in an article of clothing. Quite frequently this injury happens during sporting activities.

What are the signs and symptoms of a finger dislocation?

If you have dislocated your finger you may notice a deformity or change in the direction of the finger. It will probably be swollen and bruised. It is usually painful around the joint and particularly with any movement. It may be more difficult to see the knuckles and you might find it difficult to open and close your fingers.

It is necessary to take an x-ray to check for any fracture of the bones and to check that the bones are back in the correct position.

What are the treatments available for a finger dislocation?

Commonly you, a friend or the doctor may pull the finger back into position straight after the injury and before any xrays are taken. Initially it is important to be sure that the bones are back in the correct position in the joint and that the joint is stable.

Most finger dislocations are successfully treated without surgery and the joint usually heals without any serious long term consequences.

The options for non-surgical management are usually to:

1. 'Buddy strap' the finger to a neighbouring finger for two to four weeks and move it as pain allows
2. Support the finger in a plastic splint and then move the finger as pain allows

It is important that you start gentle movement early and that you try to use the finger for light activities. You should expect to start trying to move the finger within 48 hours of the injury and to be able to make a full fist within two weeks of the injury. Exercises to help you do this are outlined below.

You may require an operation if:

1. There is a large or complex fracture causing disruption to the joint surfaces
2. It is not possible to reduce the dislocation in A&E
3. The joint is unstable

What is the usual outcome after a finger dislocation?

Many finger dislocations heal without problems. It may take several months for any swelling to resolve and to feel like you have full strength and flexibility in the hand.

Occasionally some people will experience loss of movement and stiffness in the injured joint and they will need to see the hand therapy team for exercises, advice and splinting to try to overcome the stiffness. They may always have difficulty making a full fist or straightening the finger fully. A minor loss of straightening is unlikely to affect function however if the bent finger results in difficulty using the hand and the movement has not improved with hand therapy, it may be necessary to see a hand surgeon.

Less commonly, some people experience ongoing instability in the injured finger. This means that the ligaments are no longer providing the same level of support as they were before the injury and the finger may feel like it 'gives way'. You may notice pain and weakness on gripping. Initially it is best to try to manage this with splinting but if the instability does not resolve with this treatment it may be necessary to discuss an operation with your hand surgeon.

Some people may experience arthritis in the affected joint later in life. This is more likely if there has been a complex fracture associated with the dislocation or if the joint remained out of place for an extended period of time.

When can I return to work and sport after a finger dislocation?

You should avoid any heavy gripping, pulling and pushing for the first six weeks after your injury but you can use your hand immediately for light activities such as feeding / drinking / dressing / typing and light housework. You should avoid contact sports and heavy manual work for eight to 12 weeks.

If you require a Statement of Fitness to Work (sick note) you should contact your GP and take this information and any other documentation from the hospital. You can find more information about Fitness to Work at <http://www.nhs.uk/chq/Pages/1062.aspx>

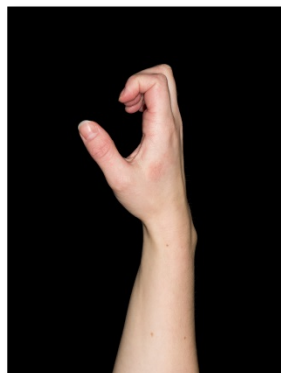
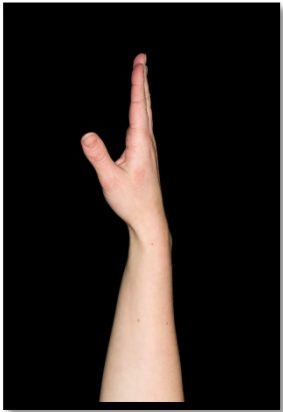
Is there anything I can do to help myself?

There are a couple of things that you can do to optimise your recovery:

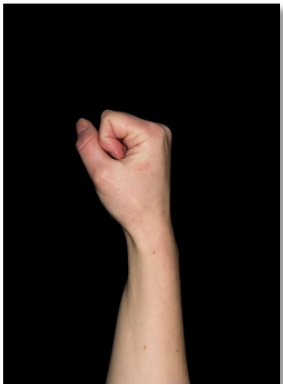
1. Simple painkillers and anti-inflammatories like paracetamol or ibuprofen can help manage pain and swelling. Please speak to your local pharmacist if you are unsure as to which medications you can safely use.
2. It is important that you try to keep your hand elevated above the level of your heart for the first one to two weeks to minimise the swelling in the finger. However you should avoid wearing a sling as this can cause discomfort in the shoulder and neck.
3. Apply ice to the swollen area for 15 minutes, three to four times per day. For example, use ice cubes or a bag of frozen peas wrapped in a tea cloth. If it starts to feel uncomfortable do not continue.
4. You should try to move your fingers, opening and closing your hand in a fist, as much as you can. This will help with the tissue healing and prevent the finger from becoming stiff
5. You should try to use your hand as normally as possible within the strapping or splint but you should avoid any heavy lifting, pulling or pushing for the first six weeks after your injury.
6. You should also make sure to maintain the normal movement in all the other joints of your hand and upper limb by moving them regularly

What exercises should I do?

To avoid stiffness and to optimise the return of movement in your hand, perform the exercises below five to ten times, five times each day as below



It is normal for these exercises to feel uncomfortable when the fingers are stiff. If they become too easy you can stop doing them.



Who can I contact for more information?

Please look at our website which has educational information for patients and professionalsw
www.londonvirtualfractureclinic.co.uk

Please note the phone line is open **Wednesday mornings** only.

From: 9:00am to 11:00am

Please call: 02033125990

Or email: VirtualFractureClinic@imperial.nhs.uk

To speak to someone about hand therapy appointments

Please telephone 0203311 0333

How do I make a comment about my treatment?

We aim to provide the best possible service and staff will be happy to answer any of the questions you may have. If you have any **suggestions** or **comments** about your visit, please either speak to a member of staff or contact the patient advice and liaison service (**PALS**) on **020 3313 0088** (Charing Cross, Hammersmith and Queen Charlotte's & Chelsea hospitals), or **020 3312 7777** (St Mary's and Western Eye hospitals). You can also email PALS at pals@imperial.nhs.uk. The PALS team will listen to your concerns, suggestions or queries and is often able to help solve problems on your behalf.

Alternatively, you may wish to express your concerns in **writing** to:

Complaints department
Fourth floor
Salton House
St Mary's Hospital
Praed Street
London W2 1NY