

Virtual fracture clinic

# Thumb sprains

## Information for patients

### What is a thumb sprain?

Movement of the thumb occurs at the joints between the small bones. The bones are held in place by strong ligaments that encircle the joint 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 thumb unexpectedly contacts a firm object or is suddenly twisted.

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

Thumb sprains usually occur in the middle joint (the metacarpophalangeal joint) of the thumb although occasionally they can also occur at the tip joint. The ulna collateral ligament, which is a strong ligament on the inside of the joint, is the most frequently injured.



### What causes a thumb sprain?

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

### What are the signs and symptoms of a thumb sprain?

If you have sprained your thumb you may notice swelling and bruising around the thumb and in the palm. You may experience some pain, particularly with movement. It may be more difficult to see the bones and knuckles of the thumb and you might find that your thumb and fingers feel stiff.

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

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## What are the treatments available for a thumb sprain?

Initially it is important to be sure that the bones are in the correct position in the joint and that the joint is stable.

Most thumb sprains 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. Support the thumb with a pre-fabricated or bespoke thermoplastic splint for two to four weeks and move it as pain allows
2. Support the thumb in a plaster of paris cast or thermoplastic splint for four weeks without movement

You may require an operation if:

1. There is a tear in the ligament with an associated avulsion fracture that is unlikely to heal on its own
2. The joint is unstable

## What is the usual outcome after a thumb sprain?

Most thumb sprains 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 thumb and hand. Gripping and repetitive work can be painful for up to six months after the injury.

Occasionally some people will experience loss of movement and stiffness in the injured joint.

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.

Infrequently, some people experience ongoing instability in the injured thumb joint and it is necessary to discuss an operation with your hand surgeon.

## When can I return to work and sport after a thumb sprain?

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 eating / 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?

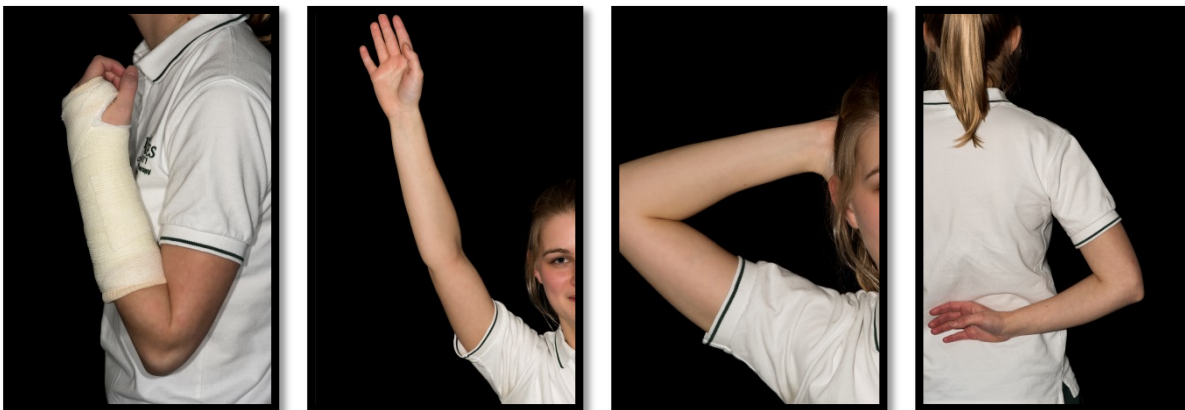
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There are a couple of things that you can do to optimise your recovery:

1. Basic 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. If you can, 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 thumb 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 to eight weeks after your injury.
6. You should also keep all the other joints of your hand and arm supple and flexible.

## What exercises should I do?

To avoid stiffness and to optimise the return of movement, perform the exercises below five to ten times, five times each day:



You should also move your fingers and ensure you can make a full fist.

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

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## Who can I contact for more information?

Please look at our website which has educational material for patients and professionals

[www.londonvirtualfractureclinic.co.uk](http://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](mailto: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](mailto: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