

Orthopaedic Connection

Ulnar Collateral Ligament Injury of the Thumb

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Transforming patient information into patient understanding.

I'll bet 99% of my readers have never heard of the Ulnar Collateral Ligament. Until it doesn't work right I guess there is no reason to know about it! Well, it is very important.

What Is It?

The Ulnar Collateral Ligament of the thumb, as doctors call it, is the prime stabilizer and support of the thumb at the base of the thumb. When the ligament is torn or even damaged you can't pinch properly and the weak thumb deviates outward. It has always gone by the name gamekeeper's thumb, apparently an occupational injury in persons working with wild game.

Nowadays, skiers are at risk from the thumb being pushed outward by the ski pole during a fall. Of course any trauma to the thumb can cause it.

Ouch

Patients remember the episode of injury. When the thumb is forced outward pain is severe and swelling and weakness are soon noted. Trying to pinch is very hard because the thumb has lost most of its support.

Then What?

Hopefully, if I don't see it initially, the medical person who does see it recognizes that it is a serious injury.

It certainly needs to be splinted until I can evaluate it.

The person seeing it initially should take x-rays of the hand to check for an associated fracture.

Examination

I carefully examine the hand and look at the plain x-ray already taken. Sometimes I even need to do a stress exam of the joint comparing the stability of the injured thumb with the opposite uninjured thumb. This can often determine if surgery is needed.

Treatment

A thumb whose ulnar collateral ligament has been partially torn can usually be treated in a special cast. An off the shelf brace is not good treatment.

Surgery is often needed if the ligament is torn in a way that will prevent it from healing. It is best to do the surgery soon rather than wait, because it is easier to repair the ligament early after it is torn. There is no reason to wait.

Complications

Thumb weakness, pain and instability in pinch can occur if treatment is not correct. Arthritis of the thumb may also occur later.

Don't wrap it with an ace bandage and hope it gets better.

My patients put their trust in me and what I do improves the quality of their lives.

Gratiot County Herald Archive and Office Website

I hope what you have read has raised questions. No problem.

Please log onto www.orthopodsurgeon.com. It has a huge amount of musculoskeletal information in the Website and the Archive of all previous GCH articles.

Check it out and be amazed what you can learn.

Good health, good life, all the best to you. Be well.

Dr. Haverbush