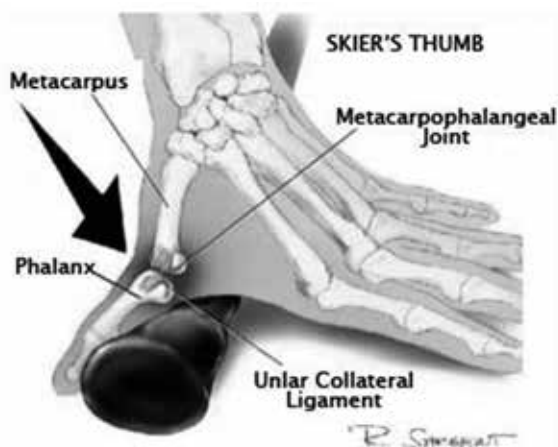


## Ulnar Collateral Ligament (UCL) Injury to the Thumb Conservative management

This is an injury to the ulnar collateral ligament of the metacarpo-phalangeal (MCP) joint. This is a strong ligament that supports the thumb when pinching or gripping and if it is damaged may lead to a chronic instability of the thumb which causes problems with function.

The injury happens when you fall onto the outstretched thumb (see diagram) and is more likely if the thumb is gripping something at the same time. Falling when skiing while holding a ski pole is a common cause hence the name 'Skier's thumb' frequently given to this injury.

Less often there is no specific injury and the cause is due to a chronic stretching of the ligament. This is referred to as a 'gamekeeper's thumb'. Patients with this problem complain of a loss of strength when pinching or gripping with the thumb.



### SYMPTOMS:

The thumb may be swollen, bruised and painful.

### TREATMENT:

Treatment consists of either a period of splintage or if completely torn, a repair of the ligament with an operation.

#### 1-6 weeks:

If the ligament is partially torn then a splint or cast is usually worn for six weeks and after its removal a programme of exercises is used to get the thumb moving again. It can take several weeks for the movement and the strength to return.

Whilst you are in the cast, make sure you try to bend and straighten the tip of your thumb. Also, keep your hand up higher than your elbow to prevent swelling. Give your elbow and shoulder a stretch every couple of hours so that these joints don't get stiff.

#### At 6 weeks:

You may still need a thermoplastic splint which will look something like this:



You will be able to use your hand with the splint on, and be able to take it off to wash your hand and to do exercises. You can also bend and straighten the tip of your thumb.

The following exercises are important to do regularly throughout the day, as your thumb is likely to be stiff.

## EXERCISES:



Try to touch each fingertip with your thumb. If you can get to your little finger, try to slide your thumb towards the base of your little finger. Then stretch your finger out to the side.

Try making big circles with your thumb.

You may be able to use your hand for light activities (eg cutting up your food, holding a cup) without the splint on, as long as you are not getting any pain around the damaged ligament. If you are getting pain, it is best to wear the splint, as the ligament will be irritable.

## At 10-12 weeks:

You may need to do some strengthening exercises - as long as you are not getting pain around the ligament, it is fine to do these:



Try to make an 'O' shape with your index finger and thumb, and pinch them together.

Pick up small objects with your thumb and each finger.

Try to squeeze a peg while maintaining the 'O' shape (this is quite difficult – it may take you a month or so to do this from having the cast off).

**Avoid contact sports for 12 weeks.**

**If you have any queries or concerns, please contact Plastics Rehabilitation (hand therapy) on: (01392) 402429.**

The Trust cannot accept any responsibility for the accuracy of the information given if the leaflet is not used by RD&E staff undertaking procedures at the RD&E hospitals.

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