

Aftercare for an extensor tendon repair to your thumb

Hands, Burns and Plastics Therapy

Information for Patients

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Introduction

Tendons are tough cords of tissue. They attach muscles to the bones. These parts all work together to make the joints in your hand move.

There are a number of extensor tendons in your hand. They let you straighten your fingers, thumb and wrist. Damage to a tendon can happen through any type of trauma causing the tendon to be cut or crushed. It takes at least 12 weeks after the tendon is repaired for it to regain full strength. Tendons need a long time to repair. At first, the repair will be very weak and if the hand is used too soon the repair can break and fail.

You have cut the tendon(s) in your thumb. They have been repaired by the surgeon.

In a tendon repair we make a cut in your hand, find the ends of the tendon, and stitch them back together. After your surgery you will get a structured therapy rehabilitation program. You will wear a splint and do an exercise program.

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Your splint

The surgeon will put a protective slab under your thumb and wrist after your tendon(s) have been repaired. This is made from Plaster of Paris. Your occupational therapist will then change it to a lighter one with straps.

The splint will protect your tendon repair. It stops you from bending your thumb too far. That will place tension on the repair. Your splint will be made in a position to let you do certain exercises while wearing it. It is very important you do not remove your splint. If you bend your thumb more than the splint lets you, your tendon repair is at risk of breaking. If this happens you will need to have another operation to repair it.

You will wear the splint all the time for 4 weeks.

You should not use your hand for your everyday activities during this time.



Your exercises

Your Therapist will teach you the exercises. Exercises lets your repaired tendon move. They stop it from becoming stuck down to other parts in your hand by scar tissue. You will start your exercises soon after your operation.

You may start your exercises in the plaster that was put on your hand when you came out of surgery or you may start them after you have had your splint fitted.

It is important that you only do your exercises while wearing the plaster or the splint.

Exercise 1

Remove the thumb strap of your splint.

Lift and straighten up your thumb as far as you are able.
Return your thumb back onto the splint. Repeat 4 times.

Do these exercises 4 times a day.



Exercise 2

Remove the thumb strap of your splint.

Lift and straighten up your thumb as far as you are able to.
Bend the tip of your thumb. Straighten the tip of your thumb.
Return back on the splint.

Repeat 4 times.

Do these exercises 4 times a day.



General advice

Activity:

For 4 weeks you should not use your hand for any activity.

Only do the exercises you have been advised to do by your therapist.

Doing more exercises than advised will not help your tendon repair to heal.

At 4 weeks you will be able to do light activity.

Your therapist will tell you which activities are safe to do with your hand.

Do not do any heavy lifting or forceful gripping until at least 12 weeks after your operation.

We will give you specific advice if you work. This will depend on your job role.

You should not drive for at least 8 weeks. Your therapist will give you more guidance.

Wound dressing:

Dressings to your wound will be carried out as needed at your appointments.

It is important you keep your hand clean and dry so that your wound will heal.

If you smoke, it is highly recommended that you stop. Smoking can affect the circulation in your hand and delay wound healing. Your therapist or doctor can give you advice about stopping smoking.

Your stitches will come out usually between 10 to 14 days after your operation. Sometimes dissolvable stitches are used. These do not need removing.

Once your wound is healed your therapist will give you advice to help to manage scarring.

Swelling:

You may have some swelling in your hand after the operation. This is quite normal.

To reduce this, it is important to raise your hand above your heart level. This can be done whilst sitting or lying by resting your hand across your chest/shoulder or by using pillows.

Do not walk around with your hand hanging down at your side for long periods for the first 4 weeks after your operation.

Complications

If your wound becomes hot, red, very painful or leaks fluid it could be infected. Please contact your GP as soon as possible.

If your exercises are going well and then suddenly you cannot move the thumb or if you have heard or felt a 'snapping', your tendon repair could have broken. If this happens you should call your surgeon's team as soon as possible.

Your tendons may become stuck to surrounding tissues. This may mean you have less range of movement in the thumb. Your therapist will give you advice to help with this.

The nerves in your thumb can be damaged at the time of your injury or during the surgery to repair your tendon. If this happens it will affect the feeling in your thumb. This may get better slowly or you may always have reduced feeling. Your therapists will talk to you more about this.

Contact details

Name of Therapist

Telephone Number: 0116 258 6826

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Previous reference:

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