

Aftercare for tendon repair to your thumb

Occupational Therapy

Information for Patients

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Introduction

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

There are a number of extensor tendons in your hand that allow you to 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. Tendons take a long time to heal. It takes at least 12 weeks after your tendon is repaired for it to regain full strength. At first, the repair will be very weak and if you use your hand too soon the repair can break and fail.

You have cut the tendon in your thumb and it has been repaired by surgery. Tendon repair involves making a cut in your hand, finding the ends of the tendon, and then stitching them back together. After surgery you will go through an occupational therapy and physiotherapy recovery programme. This will involve wearing a splint and carrying out exercises.

Your splint

After your tendon has been repaired the surgeon will put a protective slab under your thumb and wrist. This is usually made from plaster of Paris. Normally, within the first week after surgery, this will be changed by your occupational therapist to a lighter version with straps.

The splint will protect your tendon repair by stopping you from bending your thumb too far which will place tension on the repair. Your splint will be made in a position to allow you to do certain exercises whilst wearing it.



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It is very important you do not remove your splint, as if you bend your thumb more than the splint allows you to, your tendon repair is at risk of breaking. If this happens you will need to have surgery again to repair it. You will need to wear the splint at all times for 4 weeks. It is best not to use your hand for everyday activities during this time.

Your exercises

Your therapist will teach you the exercises. Exercises will allow your repaired tendon to move and stop it from becoming stuck down by scar tissue. You will start the exercises soon after surgery. 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 within 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, then return your thumb back onto the splint.

Repeat 4 times.

Carry out this exercise 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, then bend the tip of your thumb, straighten the tip of your thumb and return back into the splint.

Repeat 4 times.

Carry out this exercise 4 times a day.



General advice

Activity

For 4 weeks you should not use your hand for any activity. Only carry out the exercises you have been advised to do by your therapist; it is not beneficial to do more exercises than advised.

After 4 weeks you will be able to do light activity. Your therapist will tell you which activities are safe to do with your hand. You will be told not to do any heavy lifting or forceful gripping until at least 12 weeks after your surgery. Specific advice will be given if you are in employment, depending on your job role. You should not drive a car for at least 8 weeks; your therapist will give you further guidance on this if needed.

Dressing your wound

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 heals.

If you smoke, it is highly recommended that you stop. Smoking can affect the circulation in your hand and slow down healing of wounds. Your physiotherapist/ occupational therapist/ doctor can give you advice about stopping smoking.

Your stitches will usually come out between 10 to 14 days after surgery. If dissolvable stitches have been used, they will not need removing. Once your wound has healed your therapist will advise you on how to help reduce scarring and prevent your scar from becoming stuck down. This will help you to get back movement.

Swelling

You may have some swelling in your hand after surgery and 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 during the first few weeks after surgery.

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 you notice that you cannot move your thumb in the way you did before, or if you have heard a 'snapping' sound, your tendon repair may have broken. If this happens you should call your doctor as soon as possible.

Your tendon may become stuck down with scar tissue. This may mean you have less movement in your thumb. Your therapist will give you advice to help with this.

Damage can happen to the nerves in your thumb, either 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 therapist will give you advice about this if needed.

Contact details

Name of Occupational Therapist:

Telephone number:

Name of Physiotherapist:

Telephone number:

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