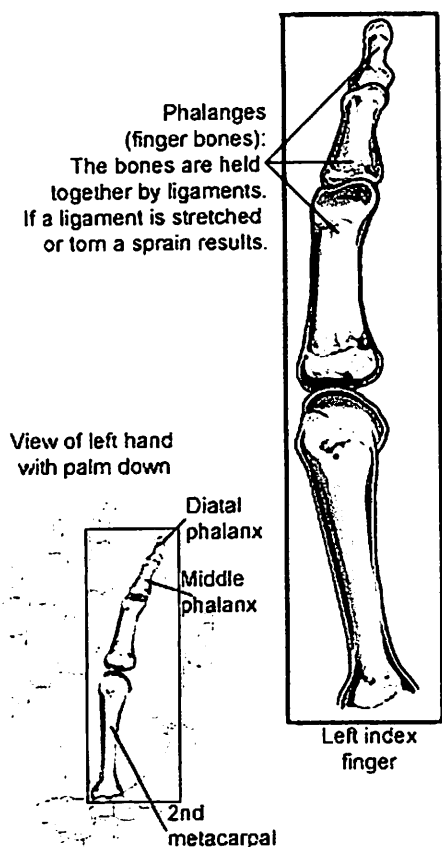


InfoSheet – Finger Sprain

David M. Klein, MD – Kennedy-White Orthopaedic Center

WHAT IS A FINGER SPRAIN?

A sprain is an injury in which ligaments are overstretched or torn. Ligaments are strong bands of tissue that connect two bones together. Finger sprains occur when a finger joint is forced beyond its normal range of movement and a ligament is damaged. Many such injuries occur from hyperextension.



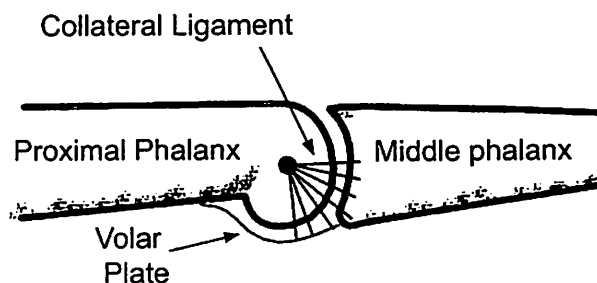
Sprains are classified according to the extent of the injury:

- Mild (Grade I) sprains involve a tear of some of the fibers in the ligament. The finger is still functional and healing is usually rapid.
- Moderate (Grade II) sprains occur when part of the ligament is torn apart. There is some loss of function and healing will likely take longer than with a mild sprain.

- Severe (Grade III) sprains result when the ligament is torn completely apart or separated from the bone. Most finger movement is lost and surgery may be needed to repair the damage.

WHAT CAUSES IT?

Finger sprains are commonly caused by accidents, such as a blow to the finger or falling on an outstretched hand. Included in this is the "jammed" finger from ball sports. Most of these are hyperextension injuries, involving dislocations or near-dislocations. Sprains can also occur from activities that place repeated or prolonged stress on a finger joint. The thumb and the index finger are the most commonly involved for this 'chronic' class of injury.



Finger Joint (side view)
Showing structures injured in a sprain

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS?

You may feel a tear or pop at the time of injury. This is followed by pain, swelling, and bruising in the area. The persistent swelling and loss of range of motion is what brings most people to seek treatment.

WHAT IS THE TREATMENT?

Conservative treatment usually includes rest and *brief* immobilization for the finger. You may need to wear a splint or have the finger "buddy-taped" to the finger next to it for approximately 2 weeks. Ice packs may be used for the first few days every 3 to 4 hours (10 to 15 minutes at a time) to reduce swelling. Your doctor may recommend anti-inflammatory medications to reduce swelling and pain. You should begin exercises to regain flexibility and strength in the finger when cleared by your doctor.

Severe sprains (some grade III sprains) may require surgical treatment to repair the ligament. This is if the finger remains unstable, meaning that the ligaments do not heal. You may need to wear a splint for about 4 - 6 weeks, depending on the extent of the sprain.

The opposite, and far more common, is when the joint scars and becomes too stiff, rather than too loose. If this is the case, your doctor may also refer you for hand therapy with an occupational or physical therapist. A spring-loaded splint is often a common treatment for stiffness that doesn't resolve with standard therapy techniques. Continued stiffness may even be treated by surgery to release the scarring.

WHAT IS THE OUTLOOK?

Typically, finger sprains heal well in patients who follow their rehabilitation program. Ligaments require from 2 to 10 weeks to heal. Your recovery will depend on your age, overall health, and the extent of your injury. With severe sprains, it is common for the swelling and stiffness to last 5-9 **months** (*this is not a typographical error!*). A small number of patients do experience complications such as re-injury, joint instability, arthritis, or inflammation where the ligament attaches to the bone.