

Gamekeeper's or Poacher's Thumb

Gamekeeper's thumb refers to an injury the ligament around the thumb, and the term was coined because the original surgeon who diagnosed the injury noticed it in a number of gamekeepers who killed rabbits. Repetitive injuries to the thumb over a period of time can injure the ulnar collateral ligament and it is generally considered a chronic condition.

This injury is very similar to skier's thumb (where the ulnar collateral ligament is damaged during a fall), but skier's thumb occurs quite quickly due to trauma, whereas gamekeeper is slower to come on. The thumb ends up being jerked away from the index finger, which stretches or completely tears the ulnar collateral ligament.

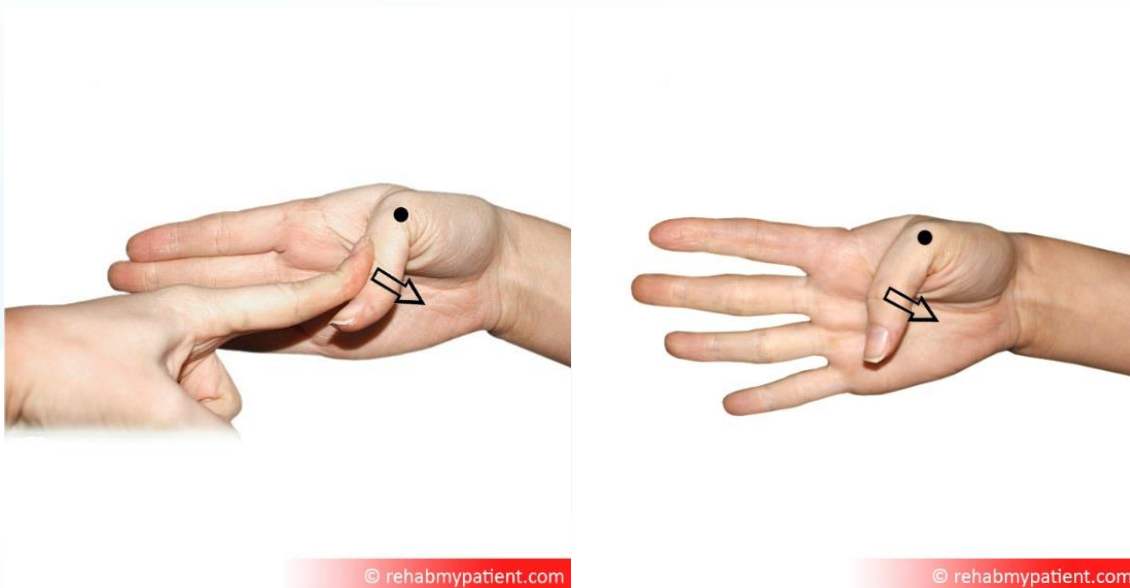
The injury can also be the result of a slow injury caused from repeated trauma to the thumb. Treating the condition can be quite difficult because of the gradual thinning in the UCL that makes it hard to reattach it whenever it becomes torn.

Injuries to the UCL in the thumb can happen to individuals who have had an accident where the thumb gets pulled backward or to the opposing side. Athletes using their hands are susceptible to injury, especially volleyball players. It is also common in those athletes playing rugby, football and wrestling because of the force that has to be applied to the thumb when grappling or tackling.

Gamekeeper's or Poacher's Thumb Anatomy

Gamekeeper's thumb is a type of injury to the UCL (ulnar collateral ligament), which is found on the inside of the thumb (at the MCP (metacarpophalangeal) joint where the hand and the thumb meet). The underlying purpose of the UCL is to maintain stability in the thumb for being able to pinch objects. Injuries to the UCL can cause an extreme amount of pain. They can result in a loss of function and strength for pinching. Most of the time, these particular injuries are repetitive or related to a fall.

Injuries around the thumb can be particularly chronic, and take many months to heal. Do not be surprised if your injured thumb takes up to 1 year to completely get better.



How to Treat Gamekeeper's Thumb:

1. Ice

Apply ice to the area for five to ten minutes at a time three to five times per day. By doing so, you can help to reduce the amount of swelling in the area.

2. Anti-Inflammatory Medication

For those who are struggling with a great deal of pain, an anti-inflammatory medication will help to reduce pain and alleviate any undue pressure on the area. Talk to your doctor about this before you take them.

3. Cast or Splint

Splinting or casting the injured hand can help to prevent any additional injuries and allow the area the time it needs to heal. Expect to spend anywhere from four to six weeks wearing the cast.

4. Surgery

Surgery is often done on an outpatient basis and the patient is able to go home that same day. During the surgery, the nerve within the injured arm will be numbed and blocked, but in some instances, the patient might need a general anesthetic. The procedure involves a small incision in the area where the ligament or the damaged tissue can be cleaned. A small suture is used for anchoring the ligament to the bone at its original insertion point to allow it to heal in the proper position. In cases of a bone fracture, pins might have to be inserted to make sure it is aligned properly.

5. Physiotherapy

Physiotherapy and manual treatment can help by using massage techniques to the ligament, as well as electrotherapy. Acupuncture can also help reduce the pain.

Tips:

- Treatment within the first month after the injury tends to be the most beneficial.
- After injury, movement to the thumb will be painful. Sometimes swelling at the base of the thumb may also indicate a problem.
- When participating in sporting activities, make sure to exercise caution when falling or hitting into another individual.
- Excessive force on the thumb can cause the condition to occur.
- If you notice bruising at the thumb base, you need to have it looked at by a professional.