The Thumb Ulnar Collateral Ligament

By Thomas J. Haverbush, M.D.
Orthopaedic Surgeon

Transforming patient information into patient understanding.

I’ll bet 99% of my readers have never heard of the Ulnar Collateral Ligament. Until it doesn’t work right there is no reason to know about it! Well, it is very important.

What Is It?
The Ulnar Collateral Ligament of the thumb, as doctors call it, is the prime stabilizer and support of the thumb at the base of the thumb. When the ligament is torn or even damaged you can’t pinch properly and the weak thumb deviates outward. It has always gone by the name gamekeeper’s thumb, apparently an occupational injury in persons working with wild game.

Nowadays, skiers are at risk from the thumb being pushed outward by the ski pole during a fall. Of course any trauma to the thumb can cause it.

Ouch
Patients remember the episode of injury. When the thumb is forced outward pain is severe and swelling and weakness are soon noted. Trying to pinch is very hard because the thumb has lost most of its support and is very weak.

Then What?
Hopefully, the medical person who does see it recognizes that it is a serious injury.

It certainly needs to be splinted until it can be evaluated.

The person seeing it initially should take x-rays of the hand to check for an associated fracture.

Examination
I carefully examine the hand and look at the plain x-ray already taken. Sometimes you even need to do a stress exam of the joint comparing the stability of the injured thumb with the opposite uninjured thumb. This can often determine if surgery is needed.

Treatment
A thumb whose ulnar collateral ligament has been partially torn can usually be treated in a special cast. An off the shelf brace is not good treatment.

Surgery is often needed if the ligament is torn in a way that will prevent it from healing. It is best to do the surgery soon rather than wait, because it is easier to repair the ligament early after it is torn. There is no reason to wait to see how it will heal.

Complications
Thumb weakness, pain and instability in pinch can occur if treatment is not correct. Arthritis of the thumb may also occur later.

Don’t wrap it with an ace bandage and hope it gets better. It will not get better.
My patients put their trust in me and what I do improves the quality of their lives.

Office Website and Gratiot County Herald Archive
What if there was a whole world of musculoskeletal information at one place? There is! www.orthopodsurgeon.com opens up for you the office Website, Your Orthopaedic Connection and the Archive of all previous GCH articles I have written for you, your family and friends.
Please check it out. Do yourself a favor.
Be well.

315 Warwick Drive
Alma, Michigan 48801
Phone 989-463-6092 for an appointment.

Dr. Haverbush