

Plastic surgery department

Tendon repairs

Information for patients, relatives and carers

Introduction

You have had surgery to repair one or more tendons in your hand/arm. This leaflet provides useful advice following your surgery.

What is a tendon?

Tendons are tough flexible bands of tissue which connect muscle to bone. When your muscle contracts, your tendon pulls your bone and causes your joints to move. The tendons which enable your fingers, thumb and wrist to move start in your forearm and extend to your fingertips and thumb.

Your injury and surgery

The plastic surgery team have repaired your damaged tendon by bringing the two cut ends together and putting some stitches inside and around your tendon.

Nerves, blood vessels, ligaments and bones can also be damaged in the same injury. Your surgeon and hand therapist will discuss this with you, as every injury is different.

After your surgery

- Your forearm and hand will be in a large bandage with a Plaster-of-Paris slab to protect your repaired tendon. **DO NOT REMOVE THIS!**
- Try to keep your bandage clean, dry and undisturbed.
- Use a plastic bag over the whole of your arm when in the bath or shower.
- **DO NOT** use your hand at all until advised
- Lift your hand above your head to exercise your shoulder and bend and straighten your elbow to prevent stiffness.
- It is important to try and minimise your swelling after surgery, as this can cause stiffness in your hand during your recovery process. To do this, try to keep your hand lifted to your shoulder, above the level of your heart. This is particularly important during the first few weeks after surgery.

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- When sitting or lying down use pillows to support your arm, especially when you are asleep.
 - When you are out and about support your arm in a sling or use your arm muscles to hold your arm across your chest towards your opposite shoulder.
 - Pain is a normal symptom after surgery. However, if the pain relief you have been provided is not adequate, we recommend contacting your GP for advice in the first instance.
 - You will get some numbness in your hand after the surgery due to the anaesthetic block, this usually lasts about 4-6 hours but can last up to 24 hours. In some cases this can present for longer, if there has been some mild bruising to the small nerves in the hand during the surgery. This should resolve within a few weeks.

Possible complications or risks following surgery

- re-tearing of the tendon (tendon rupture)
- wound infection
- the repaired tendon sticking to nearby tissue, which may prevent your joints from moving smoothly
- stiffness and some loss of movement in your finger/thumb

Tendon rupture

Your repaired tendon/s are very fragile and can be easily damaged following surgery. A tendon rupture occurs when your repair fails, and the repaired tendon ends re-tear. If this happens, it is usually in the first four weeks after the operation, when your tendon is weakest.

Tendon ruptures often happen when people don't follow advice correctly, but it can also occur accidentally such as trips, falls or suddenly catching your hand on an object.

Do not attempt to move or exercise your fingers until you have been advised at your first hand therapy appointment. It is extremely important that you do not remove the plaster cast as it is there to protect your tendon repair. If your cast becomes loose, broken or uncomfortable, call the plastic surgery team on **07394988830** so that it can be repaired or replaced as soon as possible. If you are unable to make contact or it is out of normal working hours (9-5pm Monday-Friday or at the weekend) then go to A&E.

If you feel a sudden snapping or "pinging" sensation in your hand or if your finger stops moving in the same way as before, this may indicate a tendon rupture therefore contact the plastic surgery team immediately as advised above or go straight to A&E.

Wound infection

With any surgery there is a small risk that the wound may become infected. Signs to look out for include increased pain, heat or redness around the wound. If you are concerned about any of these symptoms contact the plastic surgery team immediately as advised above or go straight to A&E.

- Keep your wound clean and dry
- If you have been prescribed antibiotics make sure you complete the course
- Smoking is associated with a delay in wound healing therefore consider reducing the amount you smoke or stop altogether. If you smoke, the best way of stopping is with a combination of specialist support and medication. If you would like to be referred to a smoking cessation service then please ask your surgeon, therapist or GP to refer you, or you can self-refer through the NHS website.

What follow up care will I need?

After your surgery you will be telephoned with two separate appointments. These should be within one week of your operation and take place on the same day. The first one will be for the hand dressing clinic and the second will be for hand therapy.

If you are finding your hand / arm painful after surgery, please make sure you take your painkillers before these appointments. It is also a good idea to bring these with you to your appointments.

Your hand dressing clinic will last approximately 30 minutes. Your surgical dressings will be removed, your wound checked and cleaned, and a new dressing applied. Your original cast will then temporarily be replaced until you attend your hand therapy appointment.

Your hand therapy appointment will last approximately 60 minutes. You will be provided with a lighter custom-made splint. After your surgery your tendon repair is very weak and can break extremely easily therefore you will require protection in this splint for up to six weeks.

It takes 12-14 weeks for the healing tendon to return to its full strength. Your hand therapist will closely supervise and guide you through the different stages of recovery advising you on what you can and can't do with your hand.

You will also be given specific exercises to start doing within your splint. These exercises will help prevent the repaired tendons getting stuck to surrounding tissue, which would reduce your finger movement.

Time off work/activity

Depending on your job/ activity we would advise:

| Type of work/ activity | Approximate time frames for using your injured hand |
|------------------------|---|
| Office based | 6-8 weeks |
| Driving | 8-10 weeks |
| Manual work | 10-12 weeks |
| Cycling | 10-12 weeks |
| Contact sport | 12-14 weeks |

If you need a sick note, please visit your GP.

Important points to remember

Do

- ✓ Keep your arm/hand up to minimise swelling
- ✓ Keep your hand clean and dry
- ✓ Lift your arm above your head regularly to maintain shoulder movement
- ✓ Call the hospital straight away if your plaster breaks or becomes loose
- ✓ Call the hospital straight away or go to A&E if you are concerned about a wound infection or tendon rupture

Do not

- ✗ Use your injured hand
- ✗ Remove your plaster– it is there to protect your fingers
- ✗ Drive

If you do not follow this advice you risk damaging your repaired tendon(s).

Useful contact details

Plastic surgery co-ordinator: **07394 988830**

Hand therapy appointments line: **020 3311 0333**

To reschedule an appointment:

1) Phone: 020 3311 0333

Option 1: If your appointment is on the same day.

Option 2: If your appointment is another date in the future.

2) Email: appointments@imperial.nhs.uk

To contact a therapist: imperial.handtherapyimperial@nhs.net.

How do I make a comment about my visit?

We aim to provide the best possible service and staff will be happy to answer any of the questions you may have. If you have any **suggestions** or **comments** about your visit, please either speak to a member of staff or contact the patient advice and liaison service (**PALS**) on **020 3313 0088** (Charing Cross, Hammersmith and Queen Charlotte's & Chelsea hospitals), or **020 3312 7777** (St Mary's and Western Eye hospitals). You can also email PALS at imperial.pals@nhs.net The PALS team will listen to your concerns, suggestions or queries and is often able to help solve problems on your behalf.

Alternatively, you may wish to complain by contacting our complaints department:

Complaints department, fourth floor, Salton House, St Mary's Hospital, Praed Street
London W2 1NY

Email: ICHC-tr.Complaints@nhs.net

Telephone: **020 3312 1337 / 1349**

Alternative formats

This leaflet can be provided on request in large print or easy read, as a sound recording, in Braille or in alternative languages. Please email the communications team:
imperial.communications@nhs.net

Wi-fi

Wi-fi is available at our Trust. For more information visit our website: www.imperial.nhs.uk