

Proximal interphalangeal joint (PIPJ) sprain

Information for patients

What is PIPJ sprain?

The PIPJ is the middle joint of your fingers.

A joint is the space between bones where movement happens. Joints are held together by ligaments and crossed by tendons. These structures are not visible on X-ray.

Ligaments and tendons can be stretched. They can also be torn if submitted to a sudden force, though this is rare.

Injuries to ligaments are called sprains. The most frequent sprain in fingers is at the PIPJ. This is usually the result of the finger being pushed backwards. In some cases, the ligament can tear off a small piece of bone when it is overstretched. This is called an 'avulsion fracture'.

PIPJ sprains and avulsion fractures are treated the same way.

What are the signs and symptoms of a PIPJ sprain?

The symptoms of most PIPJ sprains are:

- pain
- swelling
- decreased range of motion around the joint

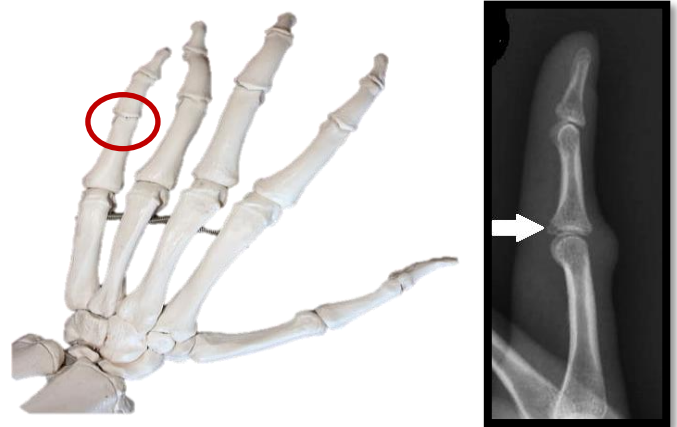
In some rare cases the joint is no longer in the right place and the finger needs to be manipulated back in position.

What treatments are available for a PIPJ sprain?

In the emergency department:

An X-ray is usually taken to assess the injury. Most patients will have the injured finger taped to another finger. This is called a buddy strap.

How a buddy strap works



Many people wonder how a buddy strap can support a broken bone. The role of the buddy strap in finger fracture is not to support the bone but to prevent some of the muscles of our hand from pulling on the broken bone.

Buddy straps also:

- help to avoid catching the finger
- help align the fingers
- help to improve movement by being attached to a stronger finger

You are recommended to keep the buddy strap on all the time for two weeks. For the next two weeks, you should keep it on when your hand could be in vulnerable, for example, when you are in crowded places.

In rare cases the finger may need to be immobilised fully. This may happen if there are concerns about joint instability or if there is an injury to a structure at the back of the joint called the central slip.

At your next appointment:

You will have your medical notes and X-ray reviewed in a virtual fracture clinic within 5 days of your emergency admission. From this review you will receive further information about your injury and the proposed treatment.

From this review there are three outcomes:

- you may be discharged with some advice on self-management. This will include the type and length of protection needed
- you may be referred to hand therapy if you require rehabilitation to help you regain your hand function. You will receive an appointment in the next 14 days
- you may need a face-to-face assessment if the joint had to be manipulated or if you had a fracture avulsion with a large fragment. This assessment is to confirm joint stability and ensure that a non-surgical treatment of your hand injury will be the best treatment option

In very rare cases, surgical intervention may be needed. This could be if the ligaments are not holding the joint in place or if there is a bone fragment affecting the joint movement.

Learn more about the **virtual fracture clinic** at www.imperial.nhs.uk/our-services/orthopaedics/virtual-fracture-clinic

How long will it take to heal?

Most people are surprised by the length of time these injuries take to heal. Ligaments heal at the same rate as bones and can, in a lot of cases, be more painful. This is because ligaments need to be strong and flexible, unlike bones, whose main role is to be strong.

A sprain often creates joint stiffness which you may feel when you use the joint for up to six months.

When can I return to my day-to-day activities?

- you can decide when to **drive** again. However, you should feel confident you can control your car safely in case of an emergency
- you can resume **moderate activities** after around eight weeks
- you must wait three months to return to **contact sports** and leisure involving impact on the hand
- your **return to work** depends on the type of work and how flexible your job or employer are. If you need a fit note (Statement of Fitness to Work) this can be provided by the surgeons, hand therapist or your GP

Will I regain full function and when?

Most people tend to underestimate the impact of finger sprain on day-to-day life and the time it takes for the signs and symptoms to resolve completely.

Pain should improve on a weekly basis. It tends to be present during use for around 12 weeks. Some people experience occasional pain for up to a year, but this is rare and tends to be associated with heavier activities or colder temperature.

At three months after the injury most patients will have regained **near full range of motion** and **strength** and will not experience significant issues in their day-to-day life. Around a quarter of patients may not have a fully straight finger. However, this is usually very mild and does not affect function.

The **shape and size** of the finger may appear different. The swelling can take up to six to 12 months to settle completely. The joint may remain slightly larger permanently.

What can I do to help myself after my emergency visit?

There are several things you can do to help your recovery:

- painkillers can be useful in the first few days after the injury, but we recommend you stop them when you start to move your hand. It is important that you feel your pain as it will be the best way to guide your return to activities
- you can gently move all joints that are not immobilised if it is comfortable to do so

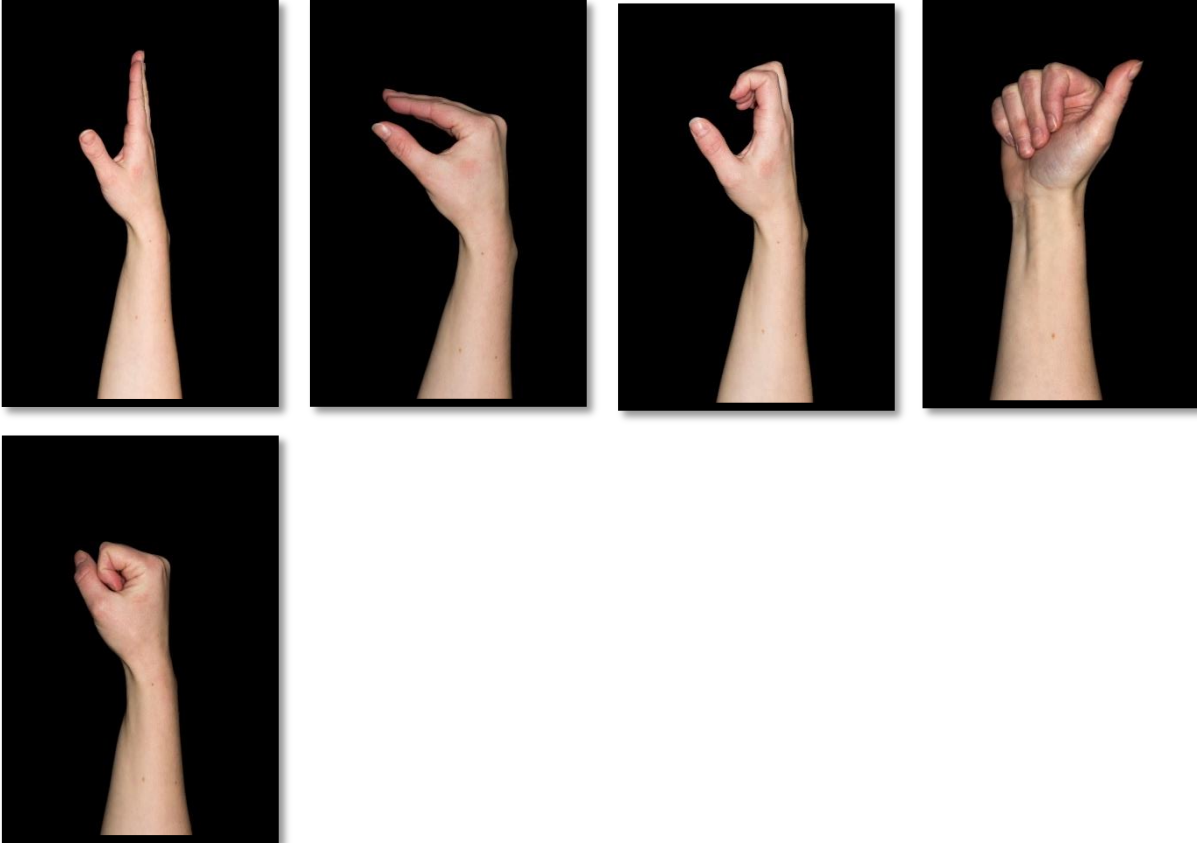
What exercises can I do?

If your fingers are free you can try to make the movements below.

- try to do each movement five times
- repeat this three times a day
- go slowly and gently

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- although you may feel mild pain when doing these, it should go away soon after you stop moving

The first few weeks are for your finger to heal.



Contact details

These contact details are not for urgent queries. Please allow 24hrs for a reply Monday-Friday.

Waiting to hear from us after your Emergency visit?

Call us on 020 3312 5552 – general virtual fracture clinic enquiries

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.patient.information@nhs.net

Wi-fi

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