



CONDITION

What is a Mallet finger?

This term refers to an injury of the bone or tendon at the very end of the finger, or very occasionally the thumb. After the injury the end of the digit droops down and can't be straightened out except by using the other hand. The deformity is supposed to resemble a mallet, or small hammer, hence the name.



Mallet Finger deformity

What causes a Mallet finger?

This deformity is caused by the tendon that straightens out the end joint (Distal Inter Phalangeal Joint, DIPJ) tearing off the bone. Sometimes a small fragment of bone comes away with the tendon and that can be seen on an X-ray. The tendon is very thin at the point where it attaches to the bone (less than 1mm thick) so even minor injuries, such as catching the finger tip in the sheets when making a bed up, can cause this problem.

Occasionally, with a bony injury, the joint cannot be held in the correct position with the splint alone and a small operation, under local anaesthetic, is needed to hold the bones in place using small pins through the skin. Your surgeon will advise you regarding this.

What are the results?

The DIPJ is always stiff when the splint is first removed and exercises are necessary for a few weeks to gradually regain movement. Often the deformity is not fully corrected by the splint but the finger functions well despite this. If a significant deformity recurs early on after splint removal a further 2 weeks of splintage is recommended.

For injuries involving a large piece of bone the joint can become uneven after this injury and painful arthritis can sometimes occur later.

How is the diagnosis made?

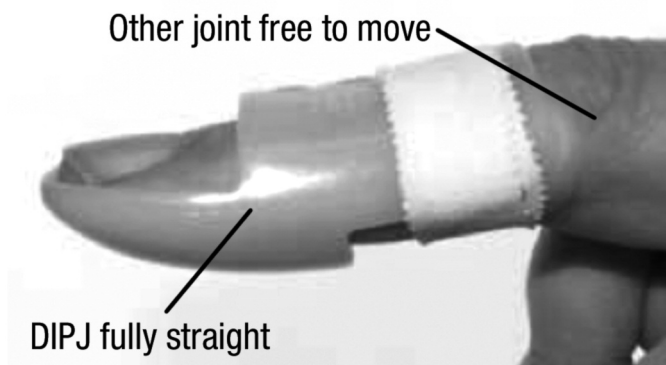
The diagnosis is usually obvious because of the position of the finger tip. An X-ray is usually taken to see whether or not there is an associated bony injury.

What is the treatment?

Almost all of these injuries can be treated with a special splint (a mallet splint) which holds the finger tip up whilst the injury heals.

A properly applied snug splint is essential. You should be shown how to carefully slide the splint off every day, keeping the finger absolutely straight and supported, to allow the skin to be cleaned and dried before the splint is re-applied.

The splint is worn full time for 6 weeks for a bony injury and 8 weeks for a tendon injury. A further 2 weeks of splint usage at night is recommended in both cases.



Mallet Splint in position