Mallet Finger

Understanding fingertip injuries, symptoms and care

Mallet Finger

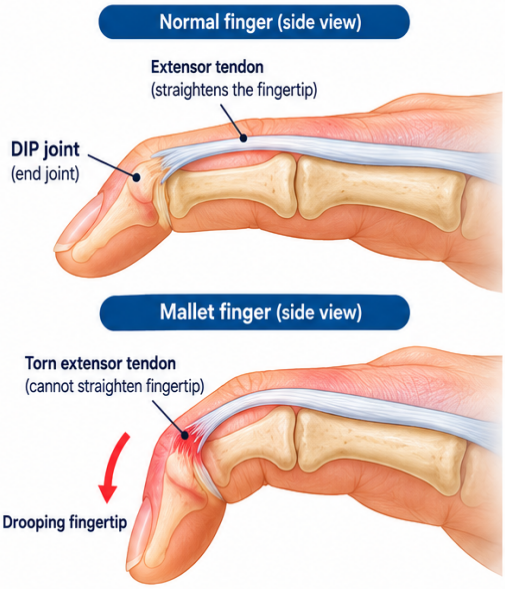
A guide to symptoms, splinting and recovery

Mallet Finger

Injury to the tip of the finger that causes it to droop

1 What is mallet finger?

Mallet finger is an injury to the tip of a finger that causes it to droop and prevents you from fully straightening it. It happens when the tendon that straightens the fingertip (extensor tendon) is damaged, often due to a sudden force to the finger.



2 How does it occur?

Mallet finger commonly happens when:



A ball strikes the tip of the finger during sports

The fingertip is forcefully bent

A minor injury damages the tendon

Sometimes a small piece of bone can be pulled away with the tendon (called an avulsion fracture).

3 Common symptoms



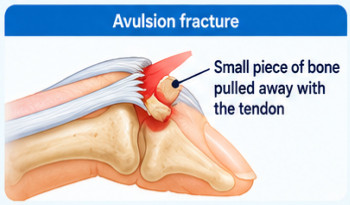
4 Normal vs mallet finger



Fingertip stays straight due to an intact extensor tendon

Fingertip droops due to a damaged extensor tendon

5 Possible associated injury



6 Treatment (mainly splinting)



A splint is worn to keep the fingertip fully straight to allow the tendon to heal.

What is mallet finger?

Mallet finger is an injury to the tendon that straightens the fingertip. The tip droops and cannot be fully straightened actively.

How does it happen?

A ball striking the fingertip or sudden forced bending may damage the tendon. Sometimes a small piece of bone is pulled away (avulsion fracture).

Seek medical assessment

A clinician can examine the finger and arrange an X-ray if a fracture or joint misalignment is suspected.

Symptoms, diagnosis and splinting

Recognising the injury and protecting the fingertip

Common symptoms

A drooping fingertip, inability to straighten it actively, pain, swelling, bruising or tenderness around the end joint.

Diagnosis

A physical examination usually identifies mallet finger. An X-ray may check for a small fracture or joint alignment.

Splinting: the main treatment

A splint keeps the fingertip straight continuously, day and night, usually for 6–8 weeks or longer if advised.

Keep the fingertip straight

Do not let the end joint bend during the prescribed splinting period. Bending can interrupt healing and require restarting treatment.

Cleaning the splint safely

Follow your clinician’s instructions for removing and cleaning the splint while keeping the fingertip straight.

Pain relief

Paracetamol may help pain. Wrapped ice for 10–15 minutes may reduce swelling if suitable.

Important information

If your splint breaks, becomes loose, or your fingertip bends accidentally, contact your treating team promptly.

Exercises and rehabilitation

Movement after splinting, under clinical guidance

Mallet finger exercise examples

Begin fingertip exercises only after the splinting period and when your healthcare professional advises. The source leaflet shows gentle mobility and grip exercises.

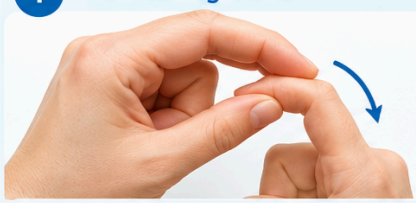
Mallet Finger – Exercise Examples

Gentle exercises to improve movement, strength and function

Important

- Start these exercises only after the splinting period, as advised by your physiotherapist or healthcare professional.
- Perform the exercises gently and regularly. Repeat each exercise 5–10 times, 2–3 times per day.
- Stop if you feel increased pain or swelling.

1 Passive finger bend



- Use the other hand to gently bend the fingertip.
- Hold for 5 seconds and then straighten.

2 Passive finger straighten



- Use the other hand to gently straighten the fingertip.
- Hold for 5 seconds.

3 Fist making



- Gently bend all fingers into a fist (as far as comfortable).
- Hold for 5 seconds, then open.

4 Finger extension



- Straighten your fingers fully.
- Hold for 5 seconds.

5 Object pick-up



- Pick up small, light objects (e.g. a soft ball or coin).
- Repeat 5–10 times.

6 Grip strengthening



- Squeeze a soft ball or putty.
- Hold for 5 seconds.
- Repeat 5–10 times.

During recovery

Wear the splint exactly as advised, avoid sports or activities that could bend the finger, and protect it during daily tasks.

Exercise safety

Do not force the fingertip to bend or begin strengthening early. Follow your physiotherapist's exercise plan.

Treatment and next steps

Splint care, recovery and when to seek help

1. Continuous splinting

Keep the fingertip straight for the full prescribed period. Your healthcare professional will check the fit and guide safe care.

2. Skin and splint care

Keep the finger clean and dry. Check the skin daily for redness or sores and seek help if the skin breaks down.

3. Exercises after splinting

Gentle movement to restore strength and flexibility should start only when your clinician confirms it is safe.

4. Surgery in selected cases

Surgery may be considered for a large fracture, joint misalignment, or unsuccessful splint treatment.

Recovery and outlook

Most people recover well with correct splinting. Some mild drooping or stiffness can remain without significantly affecting function.

Important information - seek advice

Contact your GP or treating team if the splint fails, the fingertip bends, pain or swelling worsens, or infection signs develop.

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