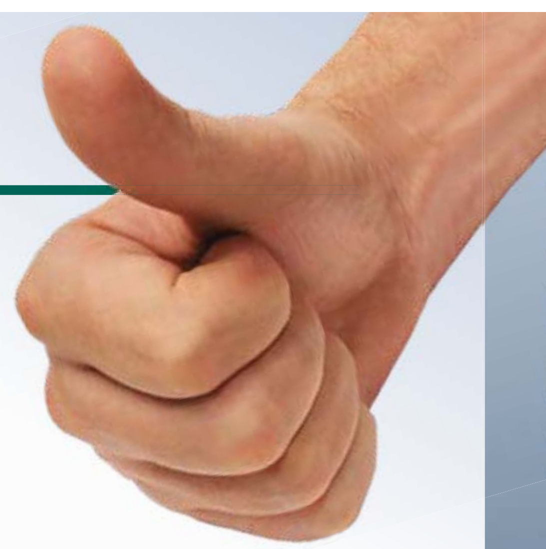
SKIER'S THUMB

by Robert S. Derkash, MD



One commonly thinks of ski injuries as involving the lower extremities; however, one of the most common disabling injuries observed in ski areas are injuries to ligaments around the thumb. They have become so prevalent that one refers to a tear of the ulnar collateral ligament as "skier's thumb."

The metacarpal phalangeal joint is the joint that is most commonly injured. It is held together with two collateral ligaments as well as a strong palmar ligament.

The most commonly injured ligament is the ulnar collateral ligament, which is the ligament next to the index finger.

The mechanism of injury is a fall on an outstretched hand where the fingers and thumb are spread. Usually the ski pole is trapped in the palm and makes it difficult to get the thumb out of harm's way. The thrust of the fall commonly tears the ulnar collateral ligament.

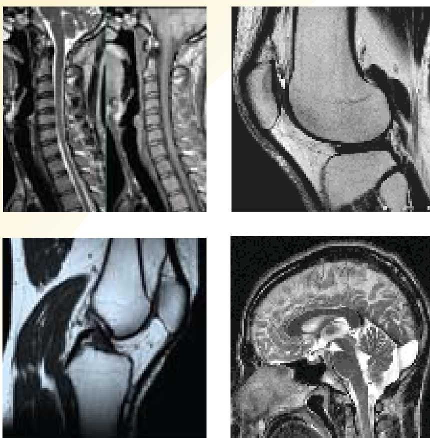
Most skiers think they have just "sprained the thumb" and don't seek medical attention for several weeks or months. This can lead to very significant, disabling pain and loss of pinch strength. If there is significant pain or swelling of the thumb that lasts more than one or two days, medical attention should be sought.

Examination in the office can usually determine the severity of the injury and the thumb's stability. X-rays are very important as the ligament can commonly pull off a piece of bone from the base of the proximal phalanx. Minor ligamentous injuries can just be treated with a cast or brace and usually heal without difficulty.

However, complete tears or tears with a small fracture heal poorly and usually lead to significant disability. Furthermore, the ulnar collateral ligament will frequently get pulled above the adductor aponeurosis, making it impossible for it to heal without surgical intervention.

Surgery for the ulnar collateral ligament is minor and can be done easily as an outpatient with just a local block and minor sedation. Acute repairs of the ulnar collateral ligament usually yield a strong, stable thumb with minimal functional loss.

In general, depending on the severity of the injury, ulnar collateral ligament injuries, if seen early, can be treated easily without leading to long-term disability. Certainly, ulnar collateral ligament injuries of the thumb do not need operative repair unless they are completely torn. ■



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