

Gamekeeper's Thumb By Sarah Lipinski, PT

The term gamekeeper's thumb, also known as skier's thumb or ski pole thumb, refers to instability or disruption of the ulnar collateral ligament, one of the ligaments of the thumb. Injury to this ligament, located on the index finger side of the thumb, can result from a fall onto an outstretched thumb. This often occurs during ski falls, as the skier lands on the ski pole. Occasionally, when the ulnar collateral ligament is strained, it pulls on the attached bone and causes a small chip of the bone to be torn off as well; this is known as a gamekeeper's fracture.

A recent gamekeeper's thumb injury will often present with the following signs and symptoms: pain, bruising or discoloration, swelling, instability, weakness, and difficulty gripping. If you think that you may have a gamekeeper's thumb injury, ice and elevation of your injured thumb are the initial treatments that you can administer yourself along with immediately contacting your physician so that your thumb can be medically examined. An X-ray, the diagnostic test of choice for this injury, confirms the presence and extent of the injury.

Physical therapy treatments are helpful in non-surgical as well as surgical gamekeeper's thumb injuries. If the ulnar collateral ligament tear is incomplete, a cast or a protective splint may be issued for the first four to six weeks. If the tear is a complete tear, surgery may be required in order to repair the ligament or bone chip to hold the joint in place. Although physical therapy treatment for gamekeeper's thumb depends on the severity of the injury, it is directed towards optimizing ligament healing to restore range of motion and strength of the thumb to its previous level of function.

The above is intended as general information only. Be sure to contact your physician for advice on your own specific medical problems.