



### SPRAINS AND DISLOCATIONS

'It's only a finger' – finger injuries can vary between a mild sprain and a serious debilitating problem and to dismiss a finger injury as 'it's only a finger' can sometimes be underestimating the impact such an injury can have.

The most important thing is to exclude the possibility of a fracture, as a **finger dislocation** that has been quickly reduced, or a severe **sprain** may in fact have some bony involvement which influences outcomes in the longer term. So see your medical professional or hand therapist for an Xray referral before proceeding with treatment. This is especially important if bruising appears rapidly.

Managing swelling is very important, swelling is loaded with fibrin, the natural way for the body to heal damaged soft tissues, however this 'spiders web of glue' can also cause joint capsules to thicken and tighten and the multiple gliding surfaces around the finger (tendons, ligaments and skin) to become tethered and stiff. Hand Therapists have many tricks of the trade for reducing **swelling** – compressive sleeves, dressings, exercises and splints can all make a dramatic difference.

The usual first aid of ice and elevation of course applies for the first 48-72 hours.

Allowing the finger **to rest** adequately is also important in the early stages – the 'move it or lose it' philosophy holds an element of truth, however exercising an injured finger excessively can cause more swelling and pain, and can in fact be causing more harm. Appropriate **protective splinting** can be invaluable, holding the joint in a good position whilst healing takes place. Often this may only be necessary at night. Protective splints for use whilst playing sport or returning to work can be made to allow enough movement to happen.

**Buddy straps** are not the only form of treating injured fingers, a poorly applied buddy strap can slow down the reduction of swelling and encourage more early movement than may be helpful. They are good at preventing sideways movement, but do not protect a joint that has been forcefully bent backwards (or hyper extended) from going back into that damaging position. It is also difficult to buddy strap a little finger adequately.

The **exercises** that are helpful following a finger injury include tendon gliding exercises, place and hold, exercises to strengthen the small deep finger extensor muscles and grip strengthening in the later stages. Advice about number of repetitions and frequency are an important part of rehabilitation, as well as alternating exercise with adequate rest.

The longer term complications following a finger sprain or dislocation include persistent swelling, stiffness, a flexion contracture (the finger remains permanently flexed at the middle joint) or long term deformity in cases of **mallet finger** and volar plate injury.

Your local hand therapist will be happy to help with swelling management, splinting, exercises and advice, and will also know when it is appropriate to refer you on to a specialist hand or plastic surgeon if this is indicated.

