



## Don't Miss the "Point" of Mallet Finger

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*Carlo, 46, is a salesman who presents with complaints of a painful right index finger. As he reveals more of the story, you learn this is the furthest thing from a sports injury—in fact, it is a domestic injury that has “benched” him from his favourite sports. Carlo is an avid ice hockey player who was helping make the bed at home. He was too aggressive with tucking the sheet and he felt an immediate, sudden pain in his right index finger. Looking at the injury, he saw that it was crooked. Even worse, he could not move or raise the end of his finger.*

On physical exam,

the

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*...and gets an X-ray across the street, returning with an hour later. The X-ray looks normal, but you can appreciate the soft tissue swelling on the dorsal aspect of the DIP joint.*

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These types of injuries are usually dealt with by the plastic surgeon, but they can also be managed by a primary-care giver. The critical part of the management is that the patient must understand that they have to wear the finger splint for six straight weeks—twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, without exception. In failing to do this, the end result can be significantly compromised.



*Conferring with your sports medicine colleague, you learn that it is not good enough to put a basic splint on the finger, but that it has to be a hyperextension splint that maintains the DIP joint in hyperextension. Keeping it in this position will give the finger the best chance to heal straight and give the most strength to the extensor tendon. She also explains how critically important it is to keep the finger clean, washing it every day, yet maintaining the finger in hyperextension while the splint is off not to lose any progress that has been made. Weekly checks of the finger and splint are also important. These checks are solely dependent on the reliability of the patient. The finger should not be exposed to any forceful activity during these six weeks.*

You tell Carlo this injury can heal really well, but the level of compliance has to be very high, otherwise he will have a permanent deformity. Carlo is sufficiently scared and realizes that he is the key to the successful treatment of his finger injury. He keeps asking when he can return to ice hockey. You tell him to concentrate on the treatment of the finger for the next six weeks and then you will discuss the matter of hockey with him.

*Carlo returns one week later. His finger is feeling great in the proper splint, to the point that he decided to play hockey. You remind him that the splint is not on for him to play hockey, but as a treatment for his finger injury. You are not sure whether he understands or not, but he assures you that the season is over and he won't play again for the next five weeks. You explain that this is his last warning. If he doesn't follow your instructions, there really is no point in returning for a followup.*

*Carlo returns each week, with a high degree of compliance. After six weeks, you remove the splint and note that his finger is as straight as an arrow. He has a decent amount of resistance with forced testing and his extensor tendon seems to have healed nicely. You explain that the tendon is still in a vulnerable state and, to be on the safe side, it should be protected for an additional four weeks during activity. He is amazed at how well the finger has healed, considering he could not move it himself six weeks earlier. He now believes in you. You tell him to wash the splint one last time and not to throw it away. He may need it again some day!*

Once you notice this typical deformity, immediately think of the treatment after the X-ray is done. Bony avulsions have a stronger healing potential than a ruptured tendon, but the treatment is usually the same in the same splint. Many injuries we treat don't have nearly the same gratification of a successful outcome as this one, provided that it is recognized early and treated appropriately right away. There are a lot of droopy fingers walking around out there; let's try to avoid future ones by not missing the point!