

Post-operative rehabilitation protocol

Trigger finger and trigger thumb release

Release of the tight pulley at the base of the finger or thumb. For patients, hand therapists, and GPs.

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The plan at a glance

The tendon glides freely once the pulley is released. Full movement starts on day one. Straightening the finger fully matters as much as bending it.

	Phase 1 Weeks 0 to 2	Phase 2 Weeks 2 to 6	Phase 3 After 6 weeks
Dressing	Bulky dressing for 2 to 3 days, then a plaster	None	None
Movement	Full fist and full straightening	Full, with stretches and scar massage	Full
Load	Light use only	Normal use, building grip	Unrestricted
Review	Wound check and stitches out at 10 to 14 days	Hand therapy if stiff	Discharge

Darker shading means tighter restriction. Times are guides. Your surgeon's instructions take precedence where they differ.

Seek advice urgently if

- The wound becomes red, hot, or swollen, or it leaks or opens.
- You have a fever or feel unwell.
- Pain or swelling increases sharply after the first few days.
- The fingertip becomes numb.
- The finger still catches or locks after two weeks.
- The dressing, splint, or cast feels too tight, or the fingers become cold, pale, blue, or very swollen.

Call 999 or go to the Emergency Department for shortness of breath or chest pain.

For anything else on this list, contact your surgical team the same day. Out of hours, call NHS 111.

Phase 1

Protect: weeks 0 to 2

Aims: control swelling, restore full movement, let the wound heal.

Do

- Keep the hand raised above the heart for the first 48 to 72 hours.
- Make a full fist, then straighten every finger fully, ten times every hour.
- Bend each joint of the operated finger in turn (tendon gliding).
- Reduce the bulky dressing to a plaster at two to three days.
- Use the hand for light tasks: eating, dressing, typing.
- Keep the wound dry until the stitches are out.

Avoid

- Heavy gripping.
- Pressure on the wound: tools, walking sticks, steering hard.
- Soaking the wound.
- Dirty or wet work.

Expected in this phase

The catching should be gone at once. The finger is often swollen and stiff for a few weeks, more so if it had been locking for a long time.

Phase 2

Recover: weeks 2 to 6

Aims: soften the scar, regain a fully straight finger, build grip.

Do

- Massage the scar firmly with plain moisturiser, several times a day.
- Straighten the finger flat on a table. Use the other hand to press it gently straight.
- Continue full fist and tendon gliding exercises.
- Start grip work with soft putty from week three.
- Return to normal daily use.

Avoid

- Heavy or repetitive gripping until week four.
- Vibrating tools until week four.
- Ignoring a finger that will not straighten. See a hand therapist.

Move on to Phase 3 when

The wound has healed, the finger straightens fully, and the scar tolerates pressure.

Phase 3

Return: after 6 weeks

Aims: full grip, no restrictions.

- Use the hand normally for work and sport.
- Keep massaging the scar while it stays firm or tender.

What to expect

Scar tenderness in the palm settles over two to three months. The condition rarely returns in the same finger. Other fingers can develop it.

Return to activity

Typical times from surgery. Each depends on comfort, movement, and healing.

Activity	From	Condition
Desk work	2 to 3 days	As comfort allows
Driving	3 to 7 days	Able to grip the wheel firmly without pain
Swimming	2 weeks	Wound fully healed
Light manual work	2 weeks	Stitches out
Gym, golf, racket sports	4 weeks	Comfortable grip
Heavy manual work	4 weeks	Scar tolerates pressure
Climbing	6 to 8 weeks	Full strength

When to slow the protocol

Some patients need more time. Your surgeon will tell you if any of these apply.

- **A finger that was fixed in a bent position.** A night splint and hand therapy are needed to regain a straight finger. This can take three months.
- **Diabetes.** Stiffness and wound healing are slower. Keep blood sugar well controlled.
- **Several fingers released together.** Swelling is greater. Expect each phase to run a week or two longer.
- **Rheumatoid arthritis.** A different operation is used. Follow your surgeon's instructions.

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This protocol is general guidance for uncomplicated trigger finger or trigger thumb release. It is not a substitute for individual medical advice. Instructions from your own surgeon and therapist take precedence.

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