

FLEXOR TENDON INJURIES. Tendons are cord-like structures that attach muscles to bone. A muscle changes into tendon then inserts into a bone. When a muscle contracts, its tendon pulls on the bone, causing it to move. The muscles that cause the fingers to flex, or move toward the palm, begin in the forearm and end as tendons in the fingers (Fig. 1). These muscles are called flexor muscles. The thumb has one flexor tendon, and each finger has two flexor tendons (Fig. 2).

Injuries. The flexor tendons and nearby nerves and blood vessels can be damaged if the hand is deeply cut on the palm side. The ends of a cut flexor tendon pull away from each other much like a cut rubber band. If your fingers are bent when the injury happens, the ends of the cut flexor tendon will move even farther apart when the fingers are straightened. Sometimes the flexor tendon is only partially cut. With a partially cut flexor tendon, you can bend your fingers; however, the movement will be painful, and you might feel catching. If both flexor tendons in one of your fingers are completely cut, the finger cannot bend (Fig. 3).

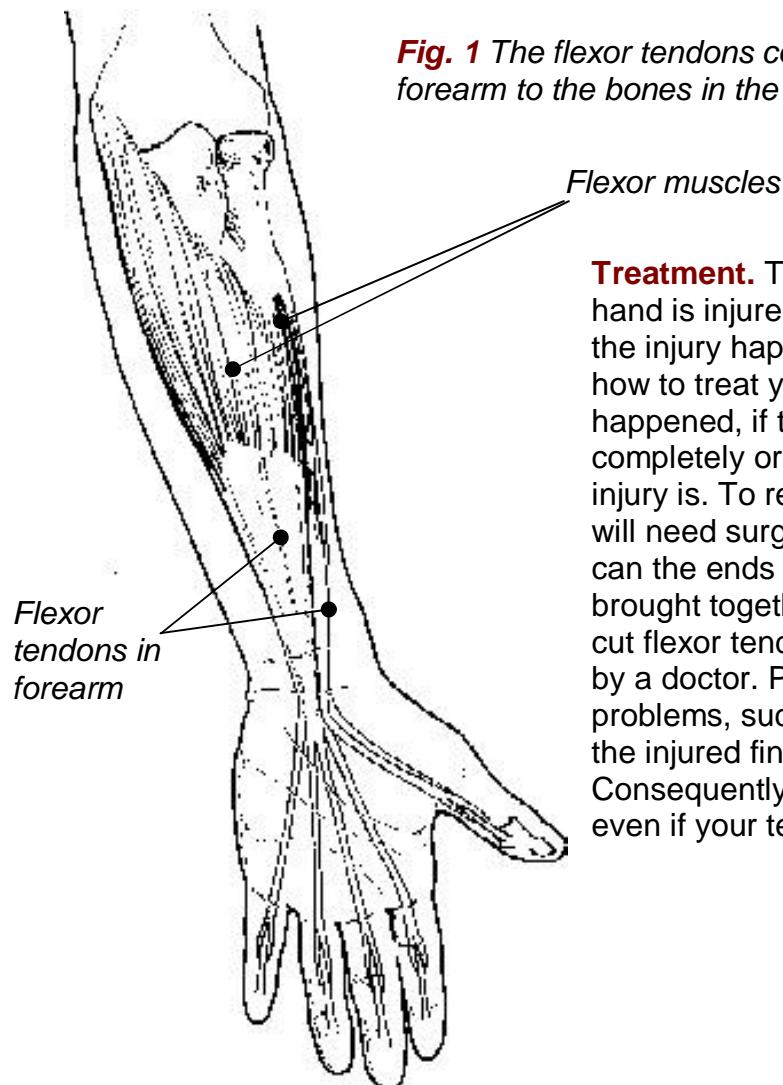


Fig. 1 The flexor tendons connect the muscles in the forearm to the bones in the fingers and thumb.

Treatment. To find out how badly your hand is injured, the doctor will ask you how the injury happened. The doctor decides how to treat you based on how the injury happened, if the flexor tendon is completely or partially cut, and where the injury is. To repair a cut flexor tendon, you will need surgery. Only through surgery can the ends of the flexor tendon be brought together so they can heal. Partially cut flexor tendons also need to be treated by a doctor. Partial cuts can lead to problems, such as painful, limited motion in the injured finger, long after the injury. Consequently, you might need surgery even if your tendon is partially cut.

Rehabilitation. Recovering from a complete cut of a flexor tendon takes time and hard work. You must do exactly what the occupational/hand therapist recommends and participate in your therapy several times each day on your own. You must be careful not to stress the injured finger too much for the first 8 weeks after surgery because the repaired flexor tendon ends can pull apart. Gentle exercises to build strength and to increase movement are usually started between 4 and 6 weeks after surgery. By 3 months after the surgery, the repaired flexor tendon will have almost healed, and you should be able to use the finger in your daily activities.

Fig. 2 The two flexor tendons enable the fingers to flex.

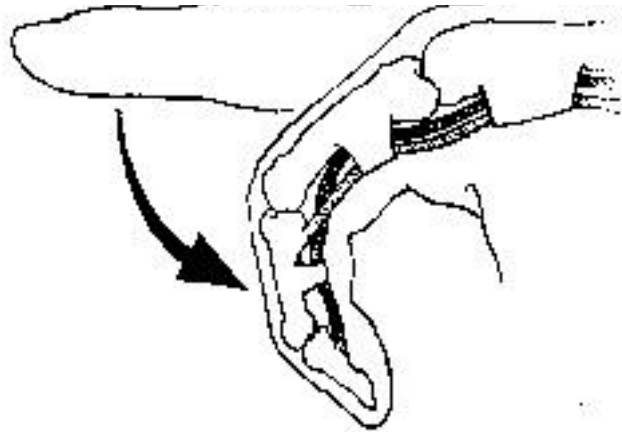


Fig. 3 If both flexor tendons in a finger are cut, the finger cannot bend.



Normal movement of the finger might never return, but after the injured flexor tendon has healed, it should be able to bend the finger. Trouble moving the finger might indicate that the repaired flexor tendon has pulled apart or is covered in scar tissue. Some scarring is normal, but at times, the scar tissue gets in the way of

moving your finger. Your doctor might prescribe special exercises or splints to loosen the scar tissue so it will not interfere with finger movement. If the exercises do not work, the doctor might need to operate again to remove this tissue.

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