

the **CrossFit** JOURNAL ARTICLES

Hand Rips

Causes, Treatments, and Prevention

Phil Savage

Rips of the skin and calluses on the hands are an annoying and painful part of any physical exercise that uses the hands intensively. Anyone can get them, and there's no getting around that fact. You can get them from shoveling snow, playing baseball, throwing the javelin, climbing ropes, or swinging on bars. You can get them from doing just about anything involving the hands. Gymnasts have to deal with them all the time, as do weightlifters and, of course, people who do a high volume of kipping pull-ups.



Hand guards (grips)

There are several ways to prevent or at least minimize rips or tears on your hands. As a gymnastics coach, I encourage my athletes to wear hand guards or grips when they are training on the rings and high bar so they can train longer and harder without worrying whether their hands are going to tear. Gymnasts typically wear these leather hand



guards (grips) when training and competing on the rings and the horizontal bar (high bar) or uneven bars. Grips for the rings have two finger holes (photos 1 and 2) and those for high bar have three (photos 3 and 4); all types have a strip of leather that protects the working side of

the hands, and some have dowels in them to extend the fingers' reach and help the gymnast lock onto the bar or rings. You can order these grips online from most any gymnastics equipment and supply company. I personally use american-gymnast.com.

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Hand Rips (continued...)

Rip causes and treatment

There are basically two qualities that make your hands susceptible to ripping. Your chances increase a lot if you've got either a) soft hands with little or no callus build-up or b) too much callus buildup that makes bumps or ridges on the surface of your hands. You need the happy medium—deep but smooth and supple calluses that protect the hands but remain intact when working.

Once you get a rip (photo 5), the healing and maintenance process must begin immediately. If you happen to have fairly thin calluses and thus the ripped skin is fairly thin as well, I suggest that you carefully pull the hanging skin off by pulling on it directly away from the point at which the skin is still attached. If the skin is stubborn and not easily detaching, get some small nail clippers or small scissors and carefully cut as much of the skin as you can away from its point of contact. If the ripped skin is very thick (heavy callus), wait until you can use nail clippers or scissors to remove the loose skin.

When my gymnasts get a rip, I usually remove their dead skin myself almost right away (I've had 35 years of experience with this tricky situation). Then I have the athlete wash their hands with soap and water (yes, this stings) to remove any blood and other impurities and cleanse the area of possible bacteria. After washing, we apply an antibacterial ointment (Neosporin), which also acts like a lubricant to replace the lost natural skin oils that were washed away in the cleansing process.

As I always tell my athletes when they get ready to go home, remember to do three things before you go to bed that night:

1. Wash your hands with soap and water one more time.
2. Apply a generous amount of Neosporin to the fresh wound.
3. Cover the wound with a small bandage or tape. This will allow the Neosporin to do its job overnight to keep the area moist and prevent infection.

Oftentimes, if the hands are exceedingly well-callused and the rip is deep, I have my athletes also wear a glove on the hand (over the bandage and all).



Photo 5



Photo 6



Photo 7

When you wake up the next morning, go ahead and wash your hands. Next, again apply a generous amount of Neosporin. If you have vitamin E oil handy, use it instead of the Neosporin (photo 6). I've found that vitamin E oil does a wonderful job in healing the wound quite fast. You can purchase vitamin E from any drugstore that sells vitamins. It comes in the form of gel capsules or

Hand Rips (continued...)

just plain old oil. I prefer the gel capsules. Just break one capsule open, squeeze the oil out, and apply it to the ripped area (photo 7). Do not cover the rip from this point forward. I have found that the sooner you expose the new skin to the open air, the more quickly it'll heal and more quickly you can return to normal training.

Personally, I do not have my gymnasts use Superglue to keep the torn skin on the hand, though this is popular in some circles. If at all possible, I take the loose skin from the hand as soon as possible (preferably right after the blister formed) and follow the steps above for caring for a rip. I've had many of my athletes return the very next day and train hard with the tape on their hands even after a deep and bloody rip.

Prevention

There are several ways to keep the hands from developing blisters and tears. First, if your hands are soft, thin-skinned, or generally unconditioned, you must slowly and gradually build up your calluses to meet the demands of your exercise. Don't overdo your hand-



Photo 8

intensive exercise while you're building up the thickness and toughness of the skin, or you'll just keep ripping your hands and not have a chance to develop good healthy protective calluses.

Once you get a rip, the healing and maintenance process must begin immediately. If you happen to have fairly thin calluses and thus the ripped skin is fairly thin as well, I suggest that you carefully pull the hanging skin off by pulling on it directly away from the point at which the skin is still attached.

Once you've developed a tough and thick skin on your hands, it's important to maintain the quality of the skin by keeping the surface well groomed. This means simply that the overall thickness of the skin on the hand surface is consistent throughout and the surface is smooth. Otherwise, over time, the calluses will have a tendency to get thicker in certain areas of the hand and not in others. You will develop "ridges" of thick skin that will eventually lead to a tearing of the skin.

What I like my athletes to do to try to prevent the hands from ripping in the future is to actually shave the calluses down to a level that maintains a relatively thick yet consistent depth of skin throughout the hand (photo 8). Ideally, your entire palm surface should be one thick callus with no bumps or ridges in any one particular area. In order to do this, groom your hands always after a hot shower or bath (this allows the calluses to swell up). While the calluses are still "swollen," I take a double-edged razor and very carefully shave the dead callus bumps down a little at a time until the bumps are about even with the thickness of the rest of the hand. With my younger students, I simply ask them to get a callus stone (you can buy one at any drug store), and gently sand the callus down even with the rest of the skin. Remember, whenever you groom or shave your calluses, don't overdo it, since you don't want to go too deep into your skin. Always leave enough thick skin so to facilitate your workout the following day. The goal is to maintain an even and consistent thickness of hard skin throughout the entire palm.

Hand Rips (continued...)

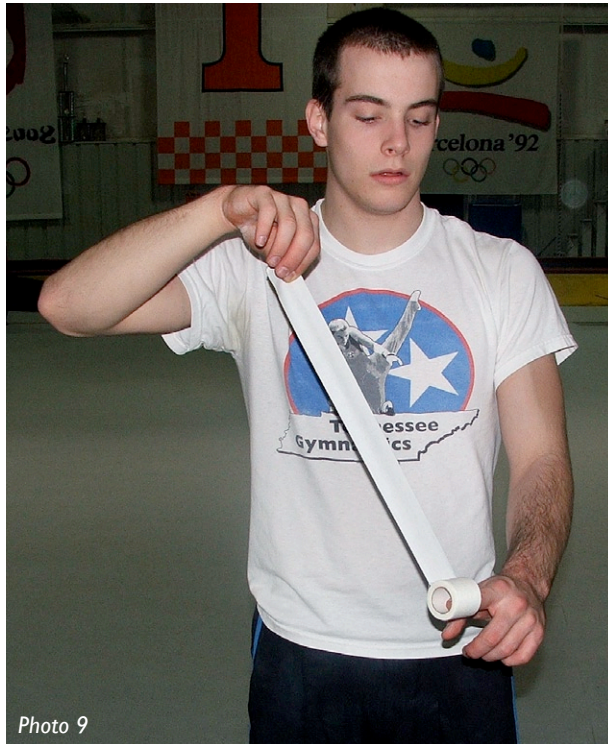


Photo 9

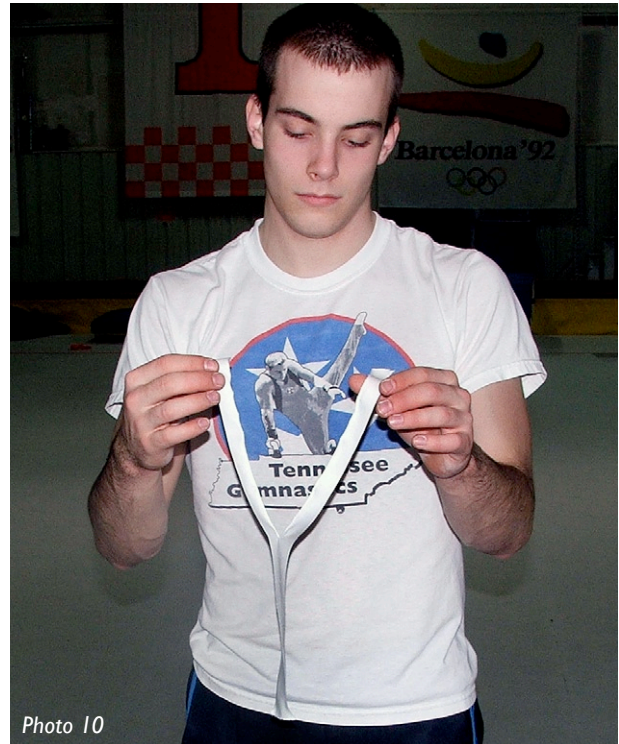


Photo 10



Photo 11



Photo 12

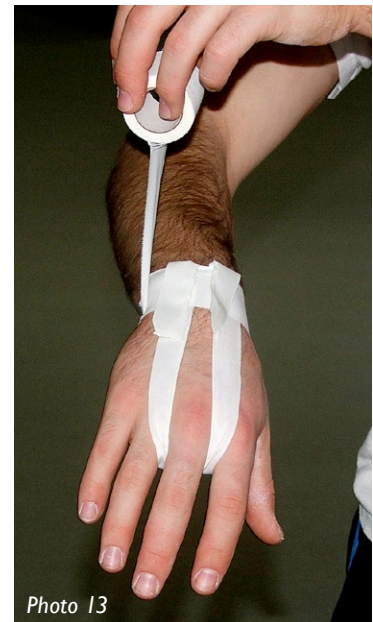


Photo 13

Hand Rips (continued...)

Training with a rip

The accompanying photos show how I have my gymnasts tape their hands the day after they rip so they can keep training.

1. Tear off a 14-inch length of 1½-inch athletic tape (photo 9).
2. Split the strip of tape lengthwise from one end to about the midpoint (photo 10).
3. Place the tape on the hand with the solid half directly over the rip on the palm and with the start of the split right at the base of the finger (photos 11 and 12). Press the tape down against the skin, starting from the inside of the wrist all the way to the split tape on the back of the hand and the top of the wrist. You can add a second layer of this tape grip on top of the first one for additional protection.
4. Use some more tape around the wrist to wrap the loose ends of the tape grip. This will “lock in” the tape grip covering the rip, and keep it from moving and coming off the hand. You only need to wrap around the wrist twice. The first time around is to hold the tape grip down, and the second time around, you can tuck in the loose extra ends of the tape grip back over the taped wrist and then tape over those extra ends (photo 13). When the grip is complete, the hand should be able to open completely.

Resources

Additional online information on hand care, callus maintenance, and rip prevention:

- <http://board.crossfit.com/showthread.php?t=13254&page=1>
- <http://drsquat.com/articles/rips.html>
- <http://rifsblog.blogspot.com/2007/05/how-to-tape-your-hands.html>
- <http://www.crossfiteastside.com/2006/02/hand-maintenance.html>



Phil Savage is a gymnastics coach and [photographer](#) in Knoxville, Tennessee, where he owns and operates a 32,000-square-foot gymnastics and cheerleading facility with his wife, Lisa. He first started gymnastics in 1964 and competed at elite levels from 1975 to 1980. Since then he has coached thousands of athletes of all ages and abilities and travels to other gyms to teach coaches and trainers how to teach gymnastics. He was the first coach inducted into the Tennessee Gymnastics Hall of Fame (2006), and he's also in the Guinness Book of World Records for the fastest mile walked on the hands in a 4-man relay.