Tommy John

(Ulnar collateral ligament reconstruction)
Background

- Tommy John surgery is medically known as ulnar collateral ligament (UCL) reconstruction.
- The UCL is a well secured band of tissue on the inside of the elbow.
- In the surgery, the surgeon reinforces the joint with a well conditioned tendon from another part the body.
- If your own tendons aren't suitable, a donor tendon may be used.
- The transplanted tendon, called a graft, is attached to your ulna and humerus to act as a new UCL.
- The surgery makes your elbow more stable, reduces pain, and restores your range of motion.
- The procedure is named after a Major League Baseball pitcher, Tommy John, who had UCL reconstruction in 1974.
Symptoms and Diagnosis

Symptoms

- UCL injuries typically happen gradually, but early warning signs that something is wrong can include a loose elbow joint and pain. Severe UCL tears can happen suddenly, mainly if you fall on your outstretched arm or are hit in your elbow. Torn UCL symptoms include:
  - Feeling a pop inside your elbow
  - Pain, from mild to severe, on the inner side of your elbow
  - Inability to grip with your hand or throw fast or with force
  - Loose or weak feeling in your elbow
  - Tingling and numbness in your fingers

Diagnosis

A physician will usually conduct a physical examination and use imaging technology to diagnose an injured UCL. A Tommy John injury is notoriously tricky to identify and benefits from having a sports medicine doctor examine the injury.

Tests for diagnosing a torn ligament in the elbow include:

- A physical exam to measure your range of motion, elbow strength, and stability
- X-rays to identify any damage, such as a fracture or break in the bone in your elbow or arm
- Magnetic resonance imaging to determine the severity and location of the tear

Treatment

Nonsurgical treatments

• Treatment options for healing ulnar collateral ligament injuries without surgery focus on increasing elbow stability and strength. These include:
  • Resting and refraining from throwing
  • Applying ice or heat to the elbow
  • Taking pain and anti-inflammatory medication
  • Platelet-rich plasma injections
  • Physical therapy to improve strength and flexibility

Surgical treatments

The procedure replaces the damaged ulnar collateral ligament with healthy tendon tissue from another part of your body. The surgery is designed to recover strength, motion, and stability in your throwing arm.

Recovery

- Rehabilitation from Tommy John surgery generally takes a year, or even to 2 years.
- The duration of rehabilitation may vary for other types of UCL surgery.
- The rehabilitation process often follows a three-phase approach.
  - Phase I involves wearing a splint, doing gentle range-of-motion exercises, and using a brace.
  - Phase II begins around 6 weeks after surgery and includes elbow-strengthening exercises.
  - During this phase, activities that stress the graft should be avoided.
  - Phase III, with the surgeon's approval, includes throwing exercises at specific time intervals.
  - Athletes can gradually progress to wind-up motions and eventually return to competition.
I conducted an interview with Avery who is a baseball player. He has experienced the Tommy John's injury. He shared the lead up to the injury, symptoms, diagnosis, treatment, and rehab. His story gives a real-life perspective on what it's like to go through this injury. Here is a summary of his experience with this injury, back in January, during the bullpen session, Avery felt tightness in his forearm, especially after throwing a curveball. He pushed through it at first, thinking it was normal, but the deep cramp sensation persisted. So, he decided to cut the session short and reached out to his trainer and pitching coach for guidance. They recommended getting it checked out, and he went to see a doctor who ordered an MRI. The MRI revealed that Avery had a tear in his forearm, which explained the discomfort. Then began his road to recovery to get back to doing what he loves.
Conclusion

To wrap it up, Tommy John's injury can be a daunting and exhausting experience for athletes to say the least, but with the thorough diagnosis, proper treatment, and rehab, a return to sport is possible. With being able to understand the background, symptoms, and recovery process is essential for athletes facing this injury. The insights from real people who have experienced it provide valuable firsthand knowledge.
Credited Sources

https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/treatments/25117-tommy-john-surgery


Interview Source: Avery Weems