

## Get A Grip On Your Rip

It's the night before the state championship gymnastics meet. You've received great scores at all the qualifying meets and there is a real chance you can win big at championships. During workout the night before, you feel really good and are hitting all your routines. Your timing is right on, you are sticking your landings. Everything is going great.

"Okay," your coach says, "That's enough, let's save something for tomorrow."

"Can I do just one more dismount on bars?"

"All right, just one and then let's call it a night."

You jump on the bars and do a long hang kip to the high bar, a solid cast handstand to two giant swings, but then, swinging down under the bar just before your dismount you feel a tearing sensation in your hand. The landing of the dismount is a little wobbly but you keep it under control.

"No!" you scream (inside your head) as you pull off your grip and stare at a flap of skin the size of a dime that is bleeding in the palm of your hand. You've ripped!

Great, just what you needed, especially the night before a competition. Why did it have to happen now? How are you going to concentrate on doing your best in the routine tomorrow with the pain of a rip constantly making itself felt? You know that you are capable of doing the routine with your hand taped, but that edge of pain can be just enough to take your mind off doing the best routine you can.

Chances are this situation has happened to many gymnasts at some point in their competitive careers. Most gymnast's have suffered rips during workouts and been told by the coach to clean it up and get back to work on routines. That is not as mean as it sounds. As clearly illustrated above, a rip could occur before a big meet and you need to learn how to deal with it to compete safely and effectively.

Rips are a common, though painful occurrence in the sport of gymnastics. Everyone gets them from the beginner to the elite level performer. For the novice gymnast, rips normally occur because the gymnast's grip on the bar is too tight because of fear or lack of familiarity with the skill. Advanced gymnasts usually rip because they allow an excess of callous to develop on their hands.

A rip is a separation of the upper layers of skin in the palm of the hand or around the wrists from the lower layers of blood rich tissue. An excessively tight grip or callous buildup allows the skin to bunch up as you are swinging

around the bar. The force of the swing pulls the upper layer of skin away from the lower layers causing a pocket to form which may become a blister or fill with blood. Whichever occurs, you can be sure that a rip is imminent.<sup>1</sup>

According to Bill Martin, an athletic trainer at Sports Physical Therapists, Inc. of Newtown, PA, prevention is the key. Martin believes that a rip can be as disabling as a big injury. He compares the gymnast's rip to a blister on the heel of a marathon runner - a disastrous situation that can ruin the race.

For the novice gymnast, simple training in appropriate swing techniques and grip change will help alleviate several rips. For the more advanced gymnast, a daily regimen of hand care must be put into effect to minimize rips and keep bar workout times more effective.

### **Before You Rip**

1. After every workout wash your hands with soap and water, then rub hand lotion into the front and back of your hands and wrists.
2. Prevent excess callous from building up by rubbing the affected areas with a pumice stone. To find the areas of excess callous, soak the hands in water for about ten minutes and you will be able to notice areas on the palm that retain a whitish color while the rest of the skin stays pink. Use the pumice stone only as necessary. Excessive use will cause the hands to be constantly sore during workouts.
3. Rub hand lotion into your hands at night before going to sleep and, if necessary, when you get up in the morning. Always keep your hands moist.

### **When You First Rip**

1. Remove the excess skin carefully. A sterilized pair of nail clippers (to prevent infection) should work nicely, then wash the injured area with soap and water. Don't put hand lotion on a fresh rip. Martin advises that you cover the rip with some "over-the-counter" antibiotic ointment rather than Vaseline so the injured area has a chance to breathe. Some pharmacies carry products called "Second Skin" or "NuSkin" that comes in patch or liquid form and may be placed directly over the rip although some products sting as much as iodine when placed on a fresh rip.

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<sup>1</sup> Another form of a "rip" occurs around the gymnast's wrists where a handguard or "grip" may continuously rub against the skin. Usually, a combination of tennis sweatbands for the wrist, gym tape and/or pre-wrap can be used to cover the area and prevent a rip. If a rip does occur on the wrist, get the first aid pads used for plantar warts that are usually oval in shape and have a hole in the center. Position the pad over the rip so the hole is directly over the injured area, then tape it in place and put sweat bands and grips on top.

2. Before going to sleep at night, put some antibiotic ointment on the rip and cover your hand with a sock or glove (with finger holes cut out) to keep the ointment off the sheets and out of your eyes. This treatment should continue until the rip is covered with new skin.

### **After You Have Ripped**

1. Once new skin has covered the rip, continue using hand lotion as described above. If the rip is allowed to dry up, the skin will crack and you will continue to rip in the same spot. Sometimes rubbing Chapstick over a drying rip can also prevent cracking.
2. If you must workout again after ripping, do not cover the rip with the sticky side of the tape. Instead lay a small piece of tape “sticky-side up” over the rip so it comes in contact with the sticky-side of the tape you are putting over the rip to protect the injured area.

On nights when you have particularly hard workouts on bars and your hands are hot and throbbing, it is a good idea to soak your hands in cool water or hold ice cubes in your hands (wrapped in a moist paper towel) until they melt. This will help the inflamed tissues to cool off. Just before a competition you can deaden the pain of a rip by keeping an ice pack on it, or soaking the hands in a slush bath of ice water for ten minutes. This will help keep your concentration on the routine instead of the pain of the rip.

However, Martin cautions that the hand should **return to normal warmth** before the actual competition.

"Discipline weighs ounces, while regret weighs a ton." Discipline yourself to take care of your hands before and after every workout so that when your chance comes to make it big in the championship meet, you will be fully prepared for success.

**[Special Note:** Wear protective latex gloves when working with an open wound.]

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Rik Feeney is a former competitive gymnast through Temple University, gymnastics coach, gymnastics club owner, and author of “**Back Handsprings: The Secret Techniques**” and “**Gymnastics Journal & Meet Survival Guide.**” For more information visit [www.GymnasticsTrainingTips.com](http://www.GymnasticsTrainingTips.com).