

Virtual fracture clinic

Fractured wrist

Information for patients

Introduction

This leaflet provides advice and exercises to do once your cast is in place. If you have any questions about the information below please speak to the hand therapy team on 020 3311 0333.

What is a wrist fracture?

A wrist fracture is a break in the radius bone, close to the wrist. In medical terms this is called a 'distal radius fracture'. Occasionally a small chip or fracture can occur in the ulna.

Fractures happen when a force is applied to a bone that is greater than the strength of the bone. This might depend on the angle at which the force is applied and how the force is generated. Fractures can happen with a fall, while playing sport or exercising, or during a work or road traffic accident.



What treatments are available for wrist fractures?

Following your treatment in A&E the hospital should contact you and give you an appointment to see a specialist in the fracture clinic within two weeks of your injury.

Many wrist fractures are successfully treated without surgery. Even in cases where the alignment of the bone fragments is disrupted, the bones can heal without any serious long-term consequences.

We look at the following factors to help us decide whether or not a fracture can be managed without surgery:

1. The nature of the fracture – the location, the number of bone fragments, if it is an open fracture where skin is broken and the alignment and stability of the fracture
2. The possible treatment strategies, including non-surgical and surgical options and the rehabilitation that is required
3. Whether you use your right or left hand
4. Your general health
5. Your occupation and recreational activities

If surgery is not required, you may still need to protect the fracture during the initial stages of healing with a cast. You usually need to wear this for six weeks. It is important to exercise the fingers and thumb whilst your cast is in place to help avoid stiffness.

If you have an operation you will normally be placed in a plaster of Paris cast. You may be referred to hand therapy to have the cast changed to a pre-fabricated brace and to start exercises.

Fracture healing

It takes approximately six to eight weeks for your bone to heal and another six weeks for the bone to become almost as strong as it was before. Some injuries are more complex with damage to the surrounding ligaments which take longer to heal. It can take between six and twelve months for you to be able to use your hand normally.

The final outcome following a hand fracture depends on many factors, including the nature and complexity of the fracture and the treatment you and the hand surgery / therapy team decide on. Early movement can also improve your outcome. However, the greatest factor to influence outcome is usually your body's own response to the injury.

Pain and swelling

Pain and swelling are normal symptoms when you break a bone. To help manage this we recommend keeping your hand raised above heart level. You may use a sling during the day but it is important to remove this regularly and move your elbow and shoulder to stop them from stiffening.

At night, use pillows to help keep your hand raised. Basic painkillers and anti-inflammatories like paracetamol or ibuprofen can help manage pain and swelling.

Seek medical attention if:

- you experience increased pain, swelling, pins and needles or numbness in your affected arm that is not relieved by basic pain medication and raising your arm
- the cast breaks, is too tight or becomes loose

While in the cast please:

- keep your hand raised above your elbow as much as possible, especially in the first week
- keep your cast dry – cover it with a plastic bag in the bath or shower or use a waterproof cast cover which you can buy online or at a pharmacy
- only use your affected hand for light, pain-free activities
- do not lift heavy items
- do not drive

Exercises

Start exercising your fingers, thumb, elbow and shoulder immediately after your cast is applied. It is important to keep these joints moving to stop them from stiffening. Initially it might feel uncomfortable to do these exercises but with regular practice they will become easier and your movement will improve. We recommend you complete the following exercises five times a day and repeat each exercise five times, but you can do more if you feel able to.



Straighten your fingers as far as possible.



Try to make a full fist. Aim to make a full fist two weeks after your injury.



Bend your large knuckles as far as possible, keeping the rest of your fingers straight.



Start with your fingers straight, then bend the tips of your fingers, keeping the large joints straight, forming a 'hook'.



Bend both thumb joints as far as possible.



Straighten your thumb as far as possible.



Touch your thumb to the tip of each finger.



Straighten your elbow as far as possible.



Bend your elbow as far as possible.



Reach your hand above your head as far as possible.



Place your hand behind your head as far as possible.



Reach your hand behind your back as far as possible.

Who do I contact for more information?

Fracture clinic appointments: 020 3312 3736 / 6778

Email: VirtualFractureClinic@imperial.nhs.uk

Hand therapy: 020 3311 0333

Email: Therapies.Outpatients@imperial.nhs.uk

How do I make a comment about my visit?

We aim to provide the best possible service and staff will be happy to answer any of the questions you may have. If you have any **suggestions** or **comments** about your visit, please either speak to a member of staff or contact the patient advice and liaison service (**PALS**) on **020 3313 0088** (Charing Cross, Hammersmith and Queen Charlotte's & Chelsea hospitals), or **020 3312 7777** (St Mary's and Western Eye hospitals). You can also email PALS at **imperial.pals@nhs.net**. The PALS team will listen to your concerns, suggestions or queries and is often able to help solve problems on your behalf.

Alternatively, you may wish to express your concerns in **writing** to:

Complaints department
Fourth floor
Salton House
St Mary's Hospital
Praed Street
London W2 1NY

Alternative formats

This leaflet can be provided on request in large print or easy read, as a sound recording, in Braille, or in alternative languages. Please email the communications team:
imperial.patient.information@nhs.net

Wi-fi

We have a free wi-fi service for basic filtered browsing and a premium wi-fi service (requiring payment) at each of our five hospitals. Look for WiFiSPARK_FREE or WiFiSPARK_PREMIUM