

Virtual Fracture Clinic

Fractured wrist

Information for patients, relatives and carers

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 because of a fall, while playing sport or exercising, or during a workplace accident or road traffic collision.



What treatments are available for wrist fractures?

After your treatment in A&E the hospital should contact you with an appointment to see a specialist in the fracture clinic within 2 weeks of your injury.

Many wrist fractures are treated successfully 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 different factors to help us decide whether a fracture can be managed without surgery. These include:

- the type of fracture – its location, the number of bone fragments, if it is an 'open fracture' where skin is broken, and the alignment and stability of the fracture
- the possible treatment strategies, including non-surgical and surgical options and the rehabilitation needed
- whether you use your right or left hand
- your general health
- your occupation and recreational activities

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

If you have an operation, you can expect to be placed in a cast afterwards. You may be referred to hand therapy to have the cast changed to a prefabricated brace and to start exercises.

Fracture healing

Whether you have surgery or not, bone healing is expected to take the same length of time. 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.

But some injuries are more complex, with damage to the surrounding ligaments as well as the bone. Ligaments are tough bands of tissue that keep bones in place. These injuries take longer to heal. You can expect it to take between six and 12 months to be able to use your hand as normal.

The speed and success of your recovery following a wrist fracture depends on many factors. These include:

- the nature and complexity of the fracture
- your body's own natural response to the injury
- the treatment you decide on with the hand surgery or therapy team
- starting movement early and doing your exercises
- looking after yourself – ensure you are getting plenty of sleep, stop smoking and reduce alcohol intake

Stopping smoking

Medical evidence suggests that smoking prolongs fracture healing time. In extreme cases it can stop healing altogether. It is important that you consider this information with relation to your recent injury. Stopping smoking during the healing phase of your fracture will help ensure optimal recovery from this injury.

For advice on stopping smoking and local support available, see www.nhs.uk/better-health/quit-smoking/ Or you can discuss this with your healthcare professional or GP.

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. Check with a pharmacist if you are unsure whether or not you can take these medicines.

Seek medical help if:

- you experience increased pain, swelling, pins and needles or numbness in your affected arm that is not made better by basic pain medication and raising your arm
- your fingers change colour, going dusky or purple

Seek help within 24 hours such as an urgent GP appointment, call 111 or attend your nearest emergency department or walk-in centre.

While in your 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 use a strong grip
 - do not lift heavy items
 - do not lean on your affected hand
- do not drive

If your cast breaks, is too tight or becomes loose, you can contact the plaster room at St Mary's Hospital on 020 3312 1871. We can arrange a time for you to come in and get your cast checked. We are open from 9am to 5pm, Monday to Friday. We'll do our best to arrange to see you either that day or the next.

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.

To start with, it might feel uncomfortable to do these exercises. But with regular practice they will become easier, and your movement will improve.

We recommend you do these exercises five times a day. Repeat each exercise five times.

You can do more if you are able to.



Straighten out fingers as far as possible



Try to make a full fist. Aim to make a full fist 2 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'.



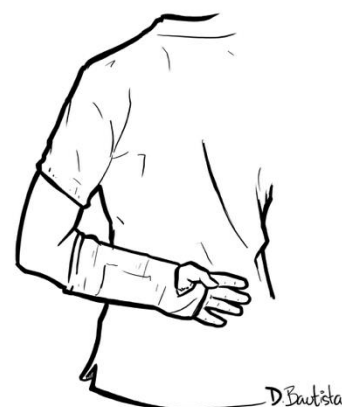
Bend both thumb joints as far as possible.



Straighten your thumb as far as possible.



Touch your thumb to the tip of each finger.



Reach your hand behind your back as far as possible.



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.

Where can I find more information?

Virtual Fracture Clinic: imperial.nhs.uk/our-services/orthopaedics/virtual-fracture-clinic

Our virtual fracture clinic can help you get the right specialist assessment as quickly as possible. You do not have to wait for an appointment letter or make a trip to hospital if not needed.

Hand therapy: imperial.nhs.uk/our-services/orthopaedics/hand-therapy

Hand and wrist clinic: imperial.nhs.uk/our-services/plastic-and-reconstructive-surgery/hand-and-wrist-clinic

How do I give feedback about my visit?

We want to hear your **suggestions** or **comments**. Your feedback helps us provide the best service. You can always speak to a member of staff.

You can also contact the **patient advice and liaison service (PALS)** on **020 3312 7777** (10am to 4pm, Monday to Friday excluding bank holidays) or email at imperial.pals@nhs.net. The PALS team will listen to your concerns, suggestions or questions and they can help solve problems.

You can make a complaint by ringing **020 3312 1337 / 1349** or emailing tr.Complaints@nhs.net. The address is Complaints department, fourth floor, Salton House, St Mary's Hospital, Praed Street, London W2 1NY.

Other ways to read this leaflet

Please email us at imperial.communications@nhs.net if you need this leaflet in a different format. This could be large print, Easy read, as a sound recording, in Braille or in a different language.

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