

Fracture

Emergency Department factsheets

What is a fracture?

A fracture is a medical term for a broken bone. A bone usually breaks when too much force is exerted against it, often during a fall or common activities such as sport. Given time and the right care, the bone heals itself.

Treatment

In the emergency department, you may have had x-rays to check for a fracture. In most instances, a plaster (cast) will be applied to hold the broken bone/s in place while the bone heals. It is important for your recovery that you keep the plaster in good condition.

Injured limbs often swell 24-48 hours after the injury and a normal plaster may become too tight and need to be 'split' or cut off. Sometimes a half plaster or 'back slab' is applied. This requires extra care as it only goes halfway around the affected limb and does not offer as much protection as a full plaster.

What to expect

- Fractures can be painful. The pain can be extreme at the beginning but it will ease once the plaster is on and the fractured limb is supported and rested. The pain will settle even further over the next few weeks.
- Simple painkillers are often needed at regular intervals for a few weeks after the initial injury. Follow the instructions on the packet.
- You may be prescribed stronger painkillers. Take them as needed and follow the instructions on the packet. Some medications may make you drowsy; if so do not drive or operate machinery.
- The plaster may be itchy for a few days, but this should ease.

- After the plaster is removed, there may be some stiffness and weakness in the limb. This should improve as you go about your normal activities.
- Sometimes physiotherapy is needed to help recovery.
- The bone will continue to recover, even after the plaster is removed. You need to take extra care and precautions to not re-injure the recovering bone, especially for the next month.
- You may feel a lump at the site of the fracture. This is the new bone, which will eventually take on the shape of your original bone.

Caring for the fracture

The plaster will support and protect the bone while the fracture heals. It can sometimes cause problems with blood flow, especially in the first couple of days. The following advice may help to avoid problems.

- Frequently move or wiggle the fingers (in the case of an upper limb plaster) or toes (for lower limb plaster).
- Keep the plaster raised to prevent swelling, especially for the first 48 hours (for example, use a sling to keep an arm raised or place pillows under your leg).

Caring for the plaster

It is important that you look after your plaster cast.

- Rest for a couple of days after the plaster is applied to allow it to set completely. Don't rest the plaster on anything immediately after having it applied.
- Keep the plaster dry. When having a shower or bath, put a plastic bag over the plaster and seal it with tape. DO NOT use a rubber

- band. Try to keep the limb away from water, to prevent any leaking in. Keep the plaster out of the rain.
- Do not stick objects down the plaster, as this may damage the skin and cause infection.
 - Do not cut or interfere with the cast.
 - Do not put weight on a cast. Use crutches as directed for a fracture in your leg.
 - Do not lift anything or drive until the fracture is healed and you have been cleared to do so by a medical professional.
 - Do not smoke as this slows the healing process.

Follow-up

You may be asked to visit a specialist fracture clinic about one week after your injury so the fracture can be checked (with x-rays). If this happens, make sure you attend this appointment.

If there are any problems with the fracture or the way it is healing, you may be referred to an orthopaedic surgeon (specialist bone doctor). It is important that you keep this appointment and take your x-rays with you if possible.

On average, a plaster stays on for about six weeks. This may be longer or shorter, depending on your age, general health and the type of fracture.

You may need to see a physiotherapist for exercises to help with muscle strength, joint mobility and balance. These exercises will help you return safely to normal activities.

Seeking help

Report immediately to your general practitioner or local hospital in the below situations:

- severe pain unable to be controlled with medications you have been given, especially in the first 24-48 hours
- marked swelling even after being raised for 20 minutes

- marked colour change to fingers/toes (blue or white)
- numbness, pins and needles in your fingers or toes
- inability to move fingers/toes
- continuous pressure at one point beneath the cast
- if your cast gets wet
- if your cast is cracked, soft, loose, tight or has an offensive smell.

13 HEALTH (13 43 25 84) provides health information, referral and teletriage services to the public in all parts of Queensland and is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year for the cost of a local call*.

*Calls from mobile phones may be charged at a higher rate. Please check with your telephone service provider

In a medical emergency, go to the nearest hospital emergency department or call an ambulance (dial 000). For other medical problems see your local doctor or health-care professional.

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