

Recovering from Wrist Fractures

Thank you for choosing Palm Beach Hand to Shoulder for your upper extremity care. I have put this information together with the patient who has sustained a wrist injury in mind. Although emphasis is placed on the patient undergoing surgical repair of a wrist (specifically distal radius) fracture, much of this information applies to patients treated with casting or bracing.

How does surgery to repair a distal radius fracture work?

Wrist fracture repairs are performed on an outpatient basis with a block that numbs the injured arm for pain control as well as a light general anesthetic. Most fractures are repaired through an incision along the thumb side of the end of the forearm. In most cases, the fracture is repaired and held in place with a small metal plate and screws.

What can I expect after surgery?

- You will have a bandage that spans the wrist with the fingers and elbow free.
- As the block placed to temporarily numb the arm wears off, patients can experience significant rebound pain, but this does not last long.
- Unless medically contraindicated, **ibuprofen 600 to 800 mg every 6 hours with food may be as effective or more effective to treat pain than prescription medicine.**
- Injury and surgery-related swelling are best managed by **keeping the arm elevated** above the level of the heart (propping up on pillows or using a sling cinched down so that the hand is higher than the elbow).
- **Ice** can be placed for up to 15 minutes at a time over the top of the hand or in the underarm region, as you may not feel the ice if placed directly over the bandage.
- Your first visit in the office after surgery will be at around 2 weeks. At this visit, we will remove your surgical bandage, make x-rays of the repaired wrist, and place you into a removable wrist brace. **If you previously received a wrist brace, please bring it with you to your appointment.**

How long will I have to wear a brace?

How long you will be in the wrist brace will depend on several factors, including the quality of your bone as well as the severity and stability of the fracture. Most patients can expect to be in the brace full time for 2 weeks, removing it only to perform prescribed exercises, shower, or wash one's hands. Thereafter, the brace can be "weaned" during inactivity or lighter activity, while still used for protection while running errands or performing heavier tasks.

What can I do to ensure the best possible recovery for my wrist injury?

- **Keep your fingers and forearm moving.** *This is the most important thing you can do to ensure a good result.* There are specific motions you can regularly make to support the recovery of your wrist. You will review these with your doctor, as well as be given guidance on how often you should exercise through these motions.
- **Take Vitamin C.** Several studies have found that taking 500 mg of oral vitamin C for 6 weeks after sustaining a wrist fracture may reduce complex regional pain syndrome (CRPS) - an exaggerated pain response to injury or surgery.

Will I need therapy?

Most patients will not need formal hand therapy after surgical or cast treatment of a wrist fracture. Studies show that patients do as well or better with a surgeon-directed home exercise program after wrist fracture repair.

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When can I return to work?

Patients with sedentary jobs may be able to return as early as one week after surgery. Desk and computer work may have to be performed with modifications but in most cases is permissible within a couple of weeks. Patients who perform repetitive tasks with their wrists (e.g. cashier, restaurant server, bank teller) will need closer to 6 weeks off from work, and patients who have to forcefully load the wrist in their jobs (e.g. nurses, construction workers) will need closer to 12 weeks off from work.

When can I resume athletics?

Generally, patients are advised against bearing weight or forceful grip (such as needed to grip a golf club or racket or open a tight lid) on their injured wrists for 10-12 weeks. Although the incision can get wet in the shower after the sutures are removed, I recommend avoiding immersing it in ocean, lake, or pool/hot tub water for a full month from the procedure.