

I have a cast...what next?

A broken bone is medically referred to as a fracture. To better support an injury sometimes a cast is applied to help hold the bones in the correct alignment. Sometimes, when swelling is a great concern, a splint or half cast can offer support until the swelling is controlled and a cast may be applied at a later stage.

After a fracture, either accidental or following surgery, swelling can become a concern in the first 48 – 72 hours. Your new cast may feel like it is quite snug or even tight. During this initial period, it is essential that you try to limit the amount of swelling by using techniques to try to decrease the amount that may occur. Limiting the amount of swelling will help to lessen the pain that you have and will aid in the healing process.

Things that you may be able to do to help reduce this swelling can include:

- **Elevation:** It is important to try to elevate your injured limb for the first 24 – 72 hours. This can be done with the aid of pillows or a support such as a recliner chair. Elevation allows for the swelling to drain away from the limb.
- **Movement:** Movement of your fingers or toes to gently encourage the movement of fluid away from your extremities is beneficial to swelling management and to help decrease the associated pain.
- **Ice:** Ice is your friend as the coolness will help reduce the associated inflammation that causes pain and swelling. You can place an ice pack in a towel and place it across toes or rest fingers upon it. The coolness from the ice will radiate up your limb and help reduce the swelling and pain.



What do I do...

Swelling can lead to more problems if left untreated or if it becomes excessive and you should seek medical assistance in the following situations.

- Increased pain and the cast is feeling like it is getting tighter

- You develop numbness or a tingling sensation in your hand or foot. This can be the result of pressure on the nerves.
- The sensation of burning or stinging may become present as the pressure of fluid increases under the skin.
- There may be an excessive amount of swelling that occurs below the cast, and this may slow the blood circulation to the extremities placing toes or fingers at risk of suffering tissue damage. If your fingers or toes become very cold or become white or blue or you have a loss of movement in the fingers or toes this requires immediate medical evaluation.

Looking after my cast....

A fracture can take approximately 6 weeks to heal enough for the cast to be removed. This time can be slightly shorter in children as they heal much quicker than an adult. Alternatively, it can take a little longer to heal if the bone quality is poor or the break is a particularly bad break.

The way you care for your cast is important so it will last for the time that is required for you to heal.

- **Keep your cast dry** – Unless you have been fitted with a waterproof cast and its lining it is necessary for you to keep your cast dry. If you get the plaster wet, it can weaken the plaster and not give the support that is required for the correct alignment in healing. There are options available to reduce the likelihood of moisture getting into the plaster.



- **Do not** poke anything under the cast if you are itchy as this can cause damage to yourself. The itching usually subsides after a few days.
- **Do not** alter the length of your cast.
- **Do not** lift anything heavy with your injured arm or drive a car with a plastered leg. Avoid any strenuous activities that may cause damage to your cast or your fractured bone.

- **Do not** walk on your cast unless your surgeon tells you that you can, and the plaster is suitable for weightbearing.
- **Inspect** the cast and the skin around the cast for signs of damage or irritation and contact your surgeon if you have any concerns about your skin. If your cast becomes loose or cracked or develops any soft areas, you should also contact your surgeon.
- **Draining** the water if you have been fitted with a waterproof cast is important to reduce the risk of developing macerated skin. It is necessary to ensure that water drains from the cast after it has been wet. This can be accomplished by raising your arm and allowing the water to drain fully or by elevating your leg in a position that can drain the excess water. It is important to monitor how the skin looks where you can visualise it.

Cast Removal...

You should never attempt to remove your own cast or get a friend to do it. A special plaster saw will be used to remove your cast. It does not cut the skin as the blade vibrates rather than spins. The padding used under the plaster also adds a layer of protection for your skin. The plaster saw is loud and can become quite warm from the friction. If this occurs or you become worried it is best to ask the person removing the plaster to stop for a minute rather than pulling your arm or leg away suddenly.



After your cast is removed don't be shocked if you feel some stiffness, weakness, and discomfort. This is often due to the muscles surrounding the fracture becoming weak due to the lack of activity over the weeks that you have had a cast. Often this will resolve as you become used to using the limb again, however, sometimes the assistance of some physiotherapy may be required.