

Wrist fracture

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The word fracture refers to a break of the bone.

The wrist joint comprises the radius and ulna long bones, and the smaller carpal bones in the hand. A fractured wrist can involve one or both of these bones, and may involve some ligament damage too. The radius is the most commonly fractured bone in the body.

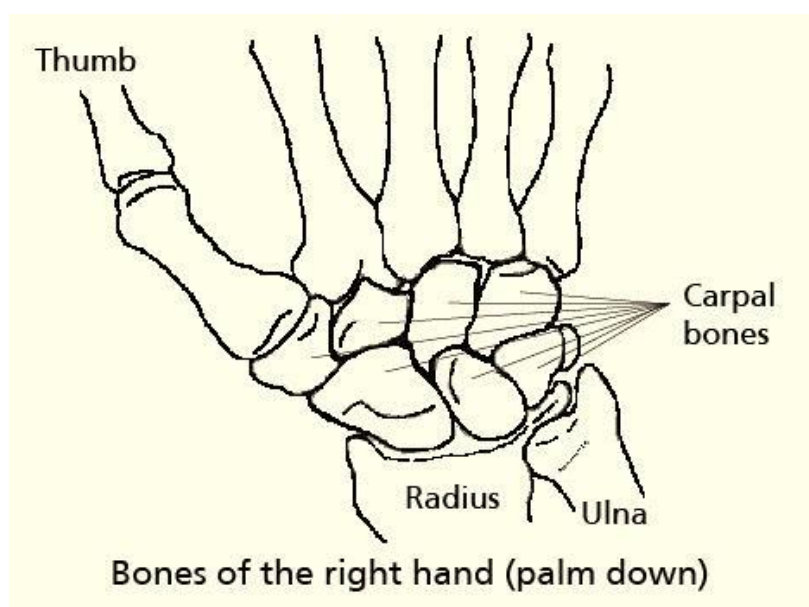
Fractures of the wrist can occur for a variety of reasons, usually with impact or due to a fall on an out-stretched hand. Most people notice pain and swelling of the joint, and it is difficult to grip with the hand and to move the wrist.

Your recovery time will depend on a number of factors, including the type of fracture and the number of bones involved. Your general health will also play a role. It can take six to eight weeks for bones to heal, although a bone will continue to strengthen for up to a year after injury.

There are different ways to treat a wrist fracture, either by surgical means or conservatively (no surgery).

Conservative treatment

A plaster cast is often used to manage a fracture where the bones are stable and have not moved position. Your doctor will discuss with you how long you should expect to wear the plaster cast.



Surgery

Your bone may be out of alignment or be unstable and therefore you will need to have an operation to 'fix' the bone in place with a plate or screws. After surgery, your wrist will be in plaster for a few weeks.

While your wrist is in plaster (during conservative treatment or after surgery)

You may need to take pain medication in order to manage your discomfort. Your doctor will discuss this with you.

You can continue to move the fingers while wearing the cast, making a gentle fist and opening the fingers. You can also bend and straighten the elbow and move your shoulder to prevent stiffness.

After your cast is removed

As the wrist hasn't been moving for a number of weeks, it is common to experience:

- Pain
- Reduced movement/stiffness
- Reduced strength
- Muscle wasting
- Swelling

What you can do

- Elevate your arm to reduce swelling (using pillows to support the arm)
- Put ice on the area for 15 minutes (wrapped in a towel), and check the skin regularly for any ice burns
- Avoid any heavy lifting with the hand for at least a month
- Eat a balanced diet, including protein and vitamins
- Start exercising the wrist (see next section)

Wrist exercises

- Circle the wrist and move the hand up and down regularly
- Gently move the hand side to side as though you were waving
- Turn your hand over (palm upwards) and back (palm down)
- Squeeze a soft ball with your fist and thumb

Each exercise can be done for 30 seconds two to three times, regularly throughout the day.



Should your doctor think it necessary, you may also be referred to a physiotherapist following surgery in order to improve the movement and strength of the wrist.

Further information

Physiotherapy Outpatients Department – 01271 322378

NHS website – www.nhs.uk/conditions

References

Pictures courtesy of HEP2go (www.hep2go.com)

PALS

The Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) ensures that the NHS listens to patients, relatives, carers and friends, answers questions and resolves concerns as quickly as possible. If you have a query or concern call 01271 314090 or email ndht.pals@nhs.net. You can also visit the PALS and Information Centre in person at North Devon District Hospital, Barnstaple.

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‘Care Opinion’ comments forms are on all wards or online at www.careopinion.org.uk.

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