

Elbow fracture (broken elbow)

Information for Patients

What is an elbow fracture?

This means that they have sustained a fracture just above or below their elbow joint. This normally treated in a cast for 3-4 weeks.



Removal of Cast

Following your fracture, you may be required to have a period of immobilisation in a cast to allow the fracture to heal. When your Consultant thinks you are ready, they will allow this to be removed. It is important that you then complete some gentle exercises 3-4 times a day to prevent the elbow from becoming stiff.

It is common for your elbow to feel uncomfortable when your plaster cast is removed, and your skin may be dry and flaky. You may bathe your elbow in warm water to help with this, as well as gently massaging the area with a plain/non-perfumed moisturiser. In addition to this, warm water can help to reduce your pain and can make movement feel easier. Therefore, doing some of the exercises below in the water or after a bath/shower may be a more comfortable way of doing the exercises.

If you have had an operation for your fracture

It is important that you ensure your wound has completely healed with no open or wet patches and stitches should be removed before getting the wound wet. This is to minimise your risk of a post-operative infection.

If you experience any of the following please contact your GP or ED at RHCYP for review:

- Severe unrelenting or worsening pain
- Worsening hot/red/swollen wound
- Fever or temperature
- A wound that is oozing or smells

What if I need pain relief?

To manage your pain and help get your elbow moving it is advised that you initially take regular simple pain relief. This can be bought over the counter from a pharmacist. If you have any allergies or conditions which affect the use of pain relief or any questions or concerns please seek advice from your GP or a pharmacist.

Rehabilitation and recovery

If you follow this advice leaflet your injury should take around 10-12 weeks to heal. However, everyone recovers from injuries at different rates and it is dependent on the severity of the injury, the soft tissue that was involved and the presence of any other medical problems. It can sometimes take many months to fully regain your elbow range of movement.

Weeks since injury	Goals and expectations.
0-4	You will likely be in a cast so during this stage it is important to keep your shoulder and fingers moving as best you can.
4-8	<p>Once your cast is removed you can start to try and add in some gentle cardiovascular activity like swimming or walking as you feel able to as well as keeping other parts of your body moving like doing core stability exercises or lower body exercises if you feel able to.</p> <p>Try to start the initial exercises in this leaflet and carry them out regularly each day to get your elbow moving as best you can. You can progress to the more difficult exercises as soon as you feel ready to, they should feel comfortable and not increase your pain at all.</p>
8-12	<p>If you have followed all of the exercises within this guide and gradually build up your activity levels it is safe to start re-introducing more challenging activities such as gently returning to some sports activities and PE as you feel able to.</p> <p>You can also start adding in more sport specific activity as you feel able to and make a gradual return to training. Remember to always be guided by your elbow – a little bit of pain that goes away quickly is normally nothing to worry about but if you are experiencing high levels of pain that don't settle quickly or if your shoulder feels unstable in any way you should contact the physiotherapy dept on 0131 3121079.</p>

Initial exercises

Try and start working through the following exercises as soon as you can – it is safe to start trying these exercises once your cast has been removed;



1. Sit with your hands on a table with your good hand on top of your injured hand and place something slidey under your hands.

Move your hands round in as big a circles as you can manage so your shoulder moves forwards, backwards, out to the side and across your body.

You may initially have to start with small movements but make them bigger as your arm feels more comfortable.

Repeat 3x10 times, twice a day.



2. Lie on your back with knees bent and feet flat on the floor, arms by your sides, palms downwards.

Bend one elbow and bring the hand towards your shoulder with palm facing towards you. Return to the starting position. You can also do this exercise in standing.

Try and move your wrist in all directions at the same time as well. Repeat 3x10 times.



3. Clasp your hands together and support your forearms on a table.

Put the back of one hand on the table and then turn your hands and put the back of the other hand on the table.

Repeat 3x10 times, a day.



4. Stand next to a wall. Place your hands on the wall, slightly wider than shoulder-width apart and fingers pointing upwards. Body is in a straight line

Keep body in a straight line and shoulders down. Bend your arms and lower your chest towards the wall. Straighten your arms and push back away from the wall.

Repeat 3x10 times.

Exercises progressions

Start these exercises as soon as your movement has returned and your pain is starting to settle;



1. Practice throwing and catching a ball with your injured arm, either against a wall or with a partner.

Practice throwing at different heights and different speeds as well as overarm and underarm throws.

Try and see how many times you can throw and catch without dropping the ball.



2. Take weight through your hands on the floor in a plank position.

Move your weight over one arm and tap the hand or shoulder of the arm your are weight bearing through then repeat on the other side.

Repeat 3x10 times a day.



3. Practice bending and straightening your elbow with a small weight in your hands. This weight should only be light to start with and this exercise should not cause any pain.

Repeat 3x10 times a day.



4. Superman/woman

On all fours, practice lifting one arm and the opposite leg, work on straightening your arm and leg as much as possible whilst keeping your body steady.

Repeat 3x10 times a day.

Return to sports and activity

Once your elbow is no longer painful and the movement is much better you can gradually return to gentle activities.

As your elbow continues to feel better you can gradually return to your usual activities like sports and PE ensuring you warm up and cool down fully.

If you feel as though you are able to, you do not have to wait for the go ahead from a health professional to return to your normal activities.

Do I require further treatment?

If you have regained full movement at your elbow, are able to use it for all normal activities pain free and don't have any feelings of instability you likely don't need any further assessment or treatment.

If you do have any concerns, ongoing pain or are struggling to return to your normal activities please call the physiotherapy department to speak with one of our physios and make a self referral.

Further advice

If you have followed all of the advice above and you are still struggling with your symptoms you can contact the physiotherapy department on details below.

Physiotherapy Team
Therapies Department,
Royal Hospital for Children and Young People,
50 Little France Crescent
Edinburgh
EH16 4SA

Telephone 0131 312 1079