

Hand therapy

Hand fractures

Information for patients

Introduction



What is a hand fracture?

You have 19 bones in your hand. Any one of these bones can be broken in an injury or accident. A fracture is the same as a broken bone.

What are the signs and symptoms of hand fractures?

The main signs and symptoms of a hand fracture are:

- swelling
- pain
- bruising
- decreased movement

An X-ray may be needed to confirm if there is a hand fracture.

What treatment options are available for hand fractures?

Most hand fractures will heal well with some type of protection and early exercises. A splint or support may be required for two to six weeks depending on the type of fracture.

The decision about the treatment you receive – surgical or non-surgical – depends on the fracture, your general health, your activities and your preferences.

Surgical treatment may be needed for more **complex fractures** such as

- a fracture involving several bone pieces (comminuted fracture)
- a fracture associated with an open wound
- a fracture where the pieces of bones are no longer in alignment (displaced or angulated fracture)

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- a fracture where the bone fragments are at risk of changing position (typically a spiral or oblique fracture pattern)
 - a fracture with other associated injuries, for example to tendons or nerves

What will happen after your emergency department (ED) visit?

If your assessment shows your injury needs surgery, you will be contacted within three days and provided with a date for surgery. However, this is unusual. Less than 10% of hand fractures require surgical intervention.

In most cases, your medical notes and X-ray will be reviewed within five days by a hand surgeon in what we call our **virtual fracture clinic**. From this review there are three possible outcomes:

- you may be discharged with advice on self-management
- you may be referred to hand therapy if you need treatment to regain your hand function. You will receive an appointment in the next 14 days
- you may be referred for a face-to-face assessment if your fracture is complex. This is to perform specialist assessment and confirm the best treatment option for your injury

Learn more about the **virtual fracture clinic** at www.imperial.nhs.uk/our-services/orthopaedics/virtual-fracture-clinic

How long will it take to heal?

Most hand fractures are healed enough between two to four weeks to allow the use of the hand in light day-to-day activities.

Strengthening exercises, such as squeezing a ball or activities requiring force, can gradually be added from eight weeks after the injury.

It takes around 12 weeks for the bone to be as strong as it was before the injury. So, heavier activities or impact sports should wait until then.

When can I return to my day-to-day activities?

- you can decide when to **drive** again. However, you should feel confident you can control your car safely in case of an emergency
- you can resume **moderate activities** after around eight weeks
- you must wait three months to return to **contact sports** and leisure involving impact on the hand

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- your **return to work** depends on the type of work and how flexible your job or employer are. If you need a fit note (Statement of Fitness to Work) this can be provided by the surgeons, hand therapist or your GP.

Will I regain full function and when?

Most people tend to underestimate the impact of hand fractures on day-to-day life and the time it takes for the signs and symptoms to resolve completely. Most people have resumed all their activities at three months after the hand fracture. In some rare instances, people feel that the fracture continues to impact their day-to-day activities after three months.

Pain should improve on a weekly basis but is likely to persist during some activities for up to three months. Some people experience occasional pain for up to a year, but this is uncommon and often associated with heavier activities or colder temperature.

Most people will regain excellent **movement**, but it is rarely exactly the same as pre-injury.

Strength will gradually improve. It can take up to between three to six months for grip strength to be back to pre-injury level.

The **shape and size** of the finger may appear different for six to 12 months. Fingers are constantly in our visual field, and it is easy to notice differences in appearance when compared to the other hand. If you wear a ring, we recommend you wait six to 12 months before resizing it as it takes this long for your finger to reach its final shape and size.

What can I do to help myself?

There are several things that you can do to help your recovery:

- painkillers may be recommended in the first few days after the injury, but we recommend you stop them when you start to move your hand. It is important that you feel your pain as it will be the best way to guide your return to activities keep your hand elevated above your heart to improve the swelling in the first week after the injury
- a sling can be useful when you are out and about, but you should avoid wearing one full time. You should not have to wear a sling after the first week. Do not worry too much about keeping your hand elevated at night – it is more important to sleep well for your recovery
- you can gently move all joints that are not immobilised if it is comfortable to do so.

Is my pain normal?

Pain is expected after a hand fracture.

Pain may be constant in the first few weeks after but is generally of mild or moderate intensity after the first week.

Occasional shooting pains that last a short while are expected in the first months but should decrease in intensity and frequency.

Contact details

These contact details are not for urgent queries. Please allow 24 hours for a reply, Monday to Friday.

Waiting to hear from us after your Emergency Department visit?

Call us on 0203 312 5552 (General virtual fracture clinic enquiries)

Where can I find more information?

Visit our website:

- virtual fracture clinic: [Virtual fracture clinic | Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust](#)
- hand therapy: [Hand therapy | Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust](#)
- hand clinic: [Hand and wrist clinic | Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust](#)

How do I make a comment about my visit?

We aim to provide the best possible service and staff will be happy to answer any of the questions you may have. If you have any **suggestions** or **comments** about your visit, please either speak to a member of staff or contact the patient advice and liaison service (**PALS**) on **020 3312 7777** (10.00 – 16.00, Monday to Friday). You can also email PALS at imperial.pals@nhs.net The PALS team will listen to your concerns, suggestions or queries and is often able to help solve problems on your behalf.

Alternatively, you may wish to complain by contacting our complaints department:

Complaints department, fourth floor, Salton House, St Mary's Hospital, Praed Street
London W2 1NY

Email: ICHC-tr.Complaints@nhs.net

Telephone: **020 3312 1337 / 1349**

Alternative formats

This leaflet can be provided on request in large print or easy read, as a sound recording, in Braille or in alternative languages. Please email the communications team:
imperial.communications@nhs.net

Wi-fi

Wi-fi is available at our Trust. For more information visit our website: www.imperial.nhs.uk

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