

Radial head or neck fracture – discharge advice

Information for patients

During your visit to the emergency department (A&E), you were advised that you have broken the radius bone in your elbow. This leaflet answers frequently asked questions about this type of injury.

What is a radial head/neck fracture?

It is a small break in the radial head/neck, which is one of the bones in your elbow.

How long does it take to recover?

This type of injury usually heals without any problems. Symptoms are usually minor but can take three to six weeks to subside.

A sling may be provided to hold your elbow in a comfortable position. You should only wear this for a few days unless advised otherwise.

Recovery plan

24 hours since injury

Try to rest your arm in the sling. A cold pack (ice pack or frozen peas wrapped in a damp towel) can provide short term pain relief. Apply this to the sore area for up to 15 minutes, every three to four hours, and ensure the ice is never in direct contact with your skin.

Please follow the advice on pain relief given by the clinician you saw in the emergency department. If you need further advice, please ask your local pharmacist or GP.

One to seven days since injury

Stop using the sling as soon as you feel able to. Start the 'elbow range of movement exercises' as described below, stopping before it becomes too uncomfortable or painful for you.

Seven days to three weeks since injury

By now you should be returning to your normal level of activity. You may still feel some discomfort with higher level activities.

If you experience a significant increase in pain and/or swelling, you will need to reduce your activity levels and gradually increase these over a longer period.

Early movement of your elbow is important to help reduce stiffness. Follow the exercises below, stopping before it becomes too uncomfortable or painful for you. Please note that forcible stretching is unnecessary and is likely to cause pain and delay your recovery.

Exercises to follow

Please note, the number of times you need to carry out each exercise is included as a guide only. Complete the exercises below within the limits of your pain. If you experience a significant amount of pain while carrying them out, you should reduce the number of times you do each exercise and gradually increase the amount during your recovery.

Elbow range of movement exercises

Repeat each exercise 10 times, three to four times a day.

1. Bend and straighten the elbow.



2. Keep your elbow by side and turn the palm of your hand up then down.



3. Open and close your fist



Return to sport

You should be able to squat, hop, jump and run pain-free before you return to sport. If you are unable to do this or need further guidance, please see your GP, and ask for a physiotherapy referral

Return to driving

You should be able to perform a full emergency stop confidently and pain-free before you consider returning to driving.

What happens next?

We do not routinely follow up patients with this type of injury as it usually heals well by itself. However, if you are still experiencing significant symptoms after six weeks, please contact the virtual fracture clinic at the hospital you first visited.

This clinic is run by a team of physiotherapists and orthopaedic doctors who can review your scans and notes to provide you with further information or support. If appropriate, they will make an appointment for you to be seen face-to-face in a fracture clinic.

Contact us

Barnet Hospital, Chase Farm Hospital, Finchley Memorial Hospital, and Cheshunt Community Hospital

- Tel: 020 8216 4445 (voicemail service only)
- Email: rf-tr.barnethospitalvfc@nhs.net

Edgware Community Hospital and Royal Free Hospital

- Tel: 020 7472 6222 (voicemail service only)
- Email: rf-tr.royalfreehospitalvfc@nhs.net

Acknowledgement and references

We would like to thank Glasgow Royal Infirmary and Leeds Teaching Hospitals for allowing us to reproduce part of their leaflets. If you require a full list of references for this leaflet please email: rf-tr.royalfreehospitalvfc@nhs.net or rf-tr.barnethospitalvfc@nhs.net.

More information

For more information about the virtual fracture clinic service at the Royal Free London, please visit our website: www.royalfree.nhs.uk/services/trauma-and-orthopaedics

Your feedback

If you have any feedback on this leaflet, please email: rf-tr.communications@nhs.net

Alternative formats

This leaflet is also available in large print. If you need this leaflet in another format – for example Braille, a language other than English or audio – please speak to a member of staff.

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