

Plaster care

A broken bone is a common event. Given time and the right care, the bone is able to heal itself. A plaster cast is applied to hold the arm or leg fracture in place while the bone heals. Once the plaster has been applied, you are advised to see a doctor the next day to check that it is fitted correctly.

On average, plaster casts stay on for about six weeks. This time is sometimes longer or shorter, depending on your age, general health and type of fracture. During this time, x-rays are done to check that the bone is healing well. If there are problems with the type of fracture or the way in which the fracture is healing, you may be referred to an orthopaedic surgeon (bone doctor).

Pain and itchiness

Common issues include:

- Fractures can be painful. The pain can be extreme at the beginning but it will ease when the plaster is on and the fractured limb is supported and rested.
- The pain will settle even further over the next few weeks.
- Simple painkillers, such as paracetamol, are often needed. Check the packet for instructions.
- The plaster causes itchiness for a few days, but this should ease.

Caring for the fracture

The plaster cast supports and protects the fracture while the bone heals. However, the cast can sometimes cause circulation problems. To help prevent this:

- In the case of an upper limb plaster cast, exercise the fingers often.
- In the case of a lower limb plaster cast, exercise the toes often.
- Keep the plastered body part raised to prevent swelling, especially for the first 48 hours. For example, use a sling to keep an arm raised, or place pillows under your leg. Ask the doctor or nurse for suggestions.

Caring for the plaster

The plaster is important, as it keeps the fracture in an acceptable position. Suggestions include:

- Rest for a couple of days once the plaster is applied to allow it to set completely.
- Keep the plaster dry. Put a plastic bag over the plaster and seal with a rubber band when having a shower or bath.
- Try to keep the plaster out of the rain.
- Don't stick objects down the plaster, as this will damage the skin.
- Don't cut or interfere with the cast.
- Don't walk on the plaster. It is better to use crutches instead.
- Don't lift anything or drive until the fracture is healed.
- Follow all plaster care instructions given to you by medical staff.

Seek urgent medical help

You should see your doctor or go to the nearest hospital emergency department straight away if you have:

- Pain despite taking painkillers
- Fingers or toes of the affected limb that go white or blue
- Fingers or toes that won't move
- Pain on moving your fingers or toes
- Numbness or pins and needles
- Any concerns about your plaster cast.

Once the plaster is removed

After the plaster cast is removed, common issues include:

- There may be some stiffness and weakness in the limb. This should improve as you go about your normal activities.
- Sometimes physiotherapy is needed to help you recover. Physiotherapy involves exercises to improve muscle strength, joint mobility and balance. These exercises help you to safely return to normal activities.
- The bone is still healing so you should take care for at least another month.
- You may feel a lump at the site of the fracture. This is the new bone, which will eventually take on the shape of your original bone.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Emergency department of your nearest hospital
- Orthopaedic surgeon
- Physiotherapist

Things to remember

- Keep the plastered body part raised to prevent swelling, especially for the first 48 hours.
- On average, plaster casts stay on for about six weeks, depending on your age, general health and type of fracture.
- Even once the plaster is removed, the bone is still healing so you should take care for at least another month.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Better Health Channel

Content on this website is provided for education and information purposes only. Information about a therapy, service, product or treatment does not imply endorsement and is not intended to replace advice from your doctor or other registered health professional. Content has been prepared for Victorian residents and wider Australian audiences, and was accurate at the time of publication. Readers should note that, over time, currency and completeness of the information may change. All users are urged to always seek advice from a registered health care professional for diagnosis and answers to their medical questions.

For the latest updates and more information, visit www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au

Copyright © 1999/2011 State of Victoria. Reproduced from the Better Health Channel (www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au) at no cost with permission of the Victorian Minister for Health. Unauthorised reproduction and other uses comprised in the copyright are prohibited without permission.