

Care of your plaster cast

This leaflet advises you on how best to look after your plaster cast after leaving the Emergency Department.

What is a plaster cast?

It is a gauze bandage that has been mixed with certain resins. When this is submerged in water, and applied to your limb, it becomes solid.

What is the difference between a 'back slab' and a full cast?

A 'back slab' is a slab of plaster that does not completely encircle the limb and is used for injuries which have resulted in swelling. It is secured with a bandage. This type of plaster is only temporary and will probably be 'completed' at your Fracture Clinic appointment.

A 'full cast' encircles the limb and does not need to be secured by a bandage. It only allows for a minimal amount of swelling.

How long does it take to dry?

A plaster cast will take 24–48 hours to dry completely although it may feel dry by the time you leave the department.

It will initially feel very heavy but less so as it dries. Do not try to speed up the process by using a hair dryer or other appliance.

During this time you should take extra care to protect the cast. For example, do not rest it on a hard surface or write on it.

What should I look out for?

New or increasing leg pain or shortness of breath

These symptoms are rare but if you experience them you should attend the nearest Emergency Department immediately as there may be signs of a blood clot developing. The medical term for this is a venous thromboembolism (VTE) or pulmonary embolus (PE).

The plaster cast has become too tight

If this happens you may notice:

- Swelling of your fingers/toes
- Numbness or pins and needles in your fingers/toes

- Pain
- White or blue discolouration of your fingers/toes and possible coldness
- Painful rubbing in any area.

The first thing you should do is to raise the limb.

Arm cast: Rest cast on a pillow/cushion so that your hand is higher than your elbow.

Leg cast: Rest cast on pillow/cushion so that your foot is higher than your hip.

If the symptoms do not improve after 1–2 hours please return to us or your nearest A&E.

- Do not attempt to remove the plaster yourself.
- Do rest your cast in this way to avoid unnecessary swelling.

The plaster cast has become too loose, cracked or soft

Under normal circumstances you should not be able to move the cast up, down or around your limb. It should feel comfortable. It should not be cracked at any point nor should it feel soft.

If you notice any of these things, and your Fracture Clinic is unable to see you urgently, please return to us or attend your nearest Emergency Department.

Important precautions

Remember, if the cast is hurting it needs attention.

- Never use anything to scratch under the cast - the slightest scratch could develop into a serious infection.
- Never trim or cut down the length of the plaster cast yourself, or attempt to tuck in extra padding.

Can I get it wet?

No. You should never allow your cast to become wet as this will weaken it. You can use a plastic bag to cover up the cast when you have a bath or shower. Use sticky tape or a rubber band to seal the bag to make it watertight. Always remove the bag as soon as you can to avoid causing sweating, which could also damage the cast.

Can I walk on my plaster cast?

No, because we have not applied a walking cast. The Fracture Clinic may decide this is appropriate at a later stage.

Can I drive?

We strongly advise that you do not drive with any type of plaster cast.

How long will I wear the cast?

This will depend upon the type of injury.

Should I exercise the affected limb?

Yes, you should exercise in order to avoid stiffness in unaffected joints. We recommend that you try the following gentle movements every couple of hours during the day.

Arm cast:

- Wiggle your fingers.
- Bend and straighten your elbow joint (only if the plaster ends below the elbow).
- Very gently rotate your shoulder.

Leg cast:

- Wiggle your toes.
- Bend and straighten your knee (only if the plaster ends below the knee).
- Gently clench the muscles in the back of your calf and thigh to improve the blood flow.

Tell us your views

If you wish to discuss any aspect of your treatment and care, please speak to a senior member of staff or to the nurse looking after you. The matrons are also available during normal working hours and they welcome your views.

You can also pick up a copy of the Trust leaflet called 'Talk to us', which explains how you can raise concerns or give feedback on your experience at the hospital.

Friends and Family Test

Whatever your experience you can give feedback by answering the Friends & Family test question – *How likely are you to recommend our service to family and friends if they needed similar care or treatment?* - by going online www.royalberkshire.nhs.uk/get-in-touch/friends-and-family-survey.htm.

Further information

More information is available on the Trust website:

www.royalberkshire.nhs.uk

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