

Expectations for Distal Radius Fracture Surgery



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What is a Distal Radius Fracture?

A distal radius fracture is a common type of fracture or break of one of the forearm bones close to the wrist. It often occurs when people fall onto an outstretched hand. Surgery is required when the broken bone is out of ideal position and may cause functional problems in the hand and wrist if treated without surgery.

What to Expect Before Surgery

The procedure is done on an outpatient basis, so you will go home the same day.

The surgery is typically done under regional anesthesia and light sedation. This means that your arm is numbed by the anesthesiologist using a technique called a brachial plexus block. This will numb and relax the muscles of your arm from the shoulder down for several hours. You will also have conscious sedation, which means you will sleep through the procedure. You will be breathing on your own, but intubation (inserting a tube into the throat) is not typically required for this surgery. You will not feel any pain during surgery, and it would be unusual for you to remember anything during surgery.

After surgery, your arm will remain numb for several hours, typically lasting around 12 hours from surgery. You should use a sling to support your arm until the numbness wears off.

What to Expect During Surgery

During the surgery, an incision is made on the palm side of the wrist. The bone is then realigned and held in place with a plate and screws. The hardware does not make the fracture heal faster but holds the bone in the appropriate position as it heals. The plate and screws are meant to stay for life and are only removed if there is a problem with them, which is unusual. The incision is usually closed with absorbable sutures that will dissolve over time.

The surgery itself usually takes less than 1 hour, but patients spend several hours at the surgery center/hospital for surgical preparation and post-operative recovery time.

What to Expect After Surgery

DRESSINGS AND SPLINTS

- **Immediately After Surgery:** You will have a soft cast/splint on your arm to immobilize the wrist, which should be kept clean and dry and should not be removed until the first follow-up appointment.
- **Please note it is normal to have swelling in your hand and fingers after surgery.**
- **First Post-Op Appointment:** After seeing your doctor and getting an x-ray, you will see hand therapy where the therapists will make you a custom removable splint and instruct you on beginning therapy exercises. **Please note that our office will schedule you a therapy appointment at the same time as your first post-operative appointment, so you will receive a call from our office confirming this appointment.**

ACTIVITY RESTRICTIONS

- It is very important to keep your hand elevated (wrist above the level of the heart) for the first several days after surgery which will help with both swelling and pain.
- Avoid lifting, pushing, or pulling with your injured arm. **Please begin moving your fingers immediately after surgery to prevent stiffness and swelling.**
- A sling is not mandatory after the block has worn off unless you have been specifically told otherwise.

PAIN MANAGEMENT

- Medications: You will be given pain medication to manage any discomfort. Since pain medications can cause nausea or constipation, you will also receive medications to help with these side effects.
- Ice and elevation are very helpful for controlling pain in the first few days after surgery. Please note, that the ice can help with pain and swelling even if you do not feel that your wrist is feeling cold through the splint.

HEALING TIME

- Most fractures take 6 to 8 weeks to heal to the degree that you do not have to wear a brace for support and protection. So, you should anticipate wearing a brace for at least 6 weeks after surgery.
- It typically takes about 6 months to get the wrist range of motion to where it was prior to surgery. Most patients ultimately get the range of motion that was present prior to surgery.
- It is very common to have pain on the ulnar side (pinkie finger side) of your wrist for several months after the surgery, even up to a year, though this usually resolves slowly with time.
- Your strength is most commonly the last thing to improve after an orthopedic injury, and this often takes a full year from your injury before your strength completely improves.

If you have any questions, the most efficient way to contact us is via the messaging portal on MyChart. Dr. Bogle's team works on checking and answering these messages throughout the workday to get back with you as quickly as possible. After hours and on weekends (outside of 8 a.m.- 5 p.m. Monday-Friday) please call 804-379-2414 to speak with the on-call provider.



X-rays of a displaced distal radius fracture that required surgery



Post-surgical x-rays of a displaced distal radius fracture