

Collarbone (Clavicle) Fractures: A Guide to Recovery After Surgery

The collarbone or 'clavicle' is a bone that connects the shoulder blade to the chest bone. Fractures or breaks of the clavicle are common injuries during childhood and with falls onto the shoulder. The majority of clavicle breaks will heal without surgery. Sometimes, if the break causes the two ends of the bone to be far apart from each other or a lot of overlap of the bones, surgery may be recommended. The goal of the surgery is to improve the chance of bone healing and to allow the bone to heal in a better position. Your surgeon will tell you if your collarbone break may benefit from surgery. Most do not need surgery.

Clavicle fractures take the same time to heal with or without surgery. Usually, the breaks heal in around 6-8 weeks but it is fairly common that it can take up to 3 months.

Non-surgical Treatment of Clavicle Fractures:

If your clavicle fracture is 'good position', no surgery is required. The arm should be supported in a sling for around 6 weeks to allow the break to heal. Your surgeon will see you and take regular xrays to make sure that the bone is healing well. Removing the sling too early and using the arm before the break has healed can lead to delayed healing of the break.

After the clavicle break heals, some patients have a bump of new bone where the collarbone was broken. This bump will be permanent and generally causes no problems, but some patients are aware of the change in appearance or cosmetics of their collarbone.

Surgery to fix a broken Clavicle:

Fixation or ORIF (Open Reduction Internal Fixation): In this surgery, the skin is cut and the collarbone is repositioned to back to where it should be and then held in position with screws and a plate. Your surgeon will ask you to wear a sling to support the arm after surgery, usually for 3-6 weeks.

The plate and screws do not need to be removed, but occasionally, patients find the plate bothersome under the skin. If this is the case, the plate and screws can be removed after the fracture has healed, usually at least 6 months after the break. This operation is performed in the operating room most commonly under general anesthesia. The surgery usually takes between 45-90 min. Usually, this operation is done as daycare surgery, where you go home the same day as the surgery.

What to expect during healing of a Clavicle Fracture: While the bone heals usually within 2-3 months, recovery takes much longer. Typically most of the recovery is completed by 3-5 months. Some stiffness in the shoulder can happen after these injuries, but usually resolves by 6 months after the injury. Sometimes, the clavicle fracture does not heal. This can happen with fractures that were treated with surgery or without. Surgery may occasionally be needed for fractures that do not heal.

Instructions for Recovery for after Collarbone Fractures:

These instructions are for patients treated with or without surgery.

Going Home After Surgery:

- Arrange to have someone take you home after surgery, even if you are taking a taxi

Bathing After Surgery:

- Keep your dressings clean and dry until your follow up appointment with your surgeon around 10-14 days after surgery. Cleanse around the area or use a plastic bag sealed with duct tape to keep the dressings dry.
- If the dressings get wet or soiled, change them
- You may bathe 2-3 weeks after surgery, if the wound is healed and dry

Care of your Incision & Wound after Surgery:

- Your wound may ooze fluid for 24-48 hours
- Keep your dressings on, clean and dry until your follow up appointment.
- If dressing becomes dirty or wet, please change.

How to change your dressings after Surgery if they become soiled or wet:

- Wash your hands with soap & water before you take care of your wound
- Throw out the white gauze bandages—the dressings will be stained with blood - and remove the white mepore dressings.
- Do not remove the Steri-Strips- small tapes that may be right on top of the wound. They will fall off themselves.
- Cover wounds with new dressing. Apply new 'mepore' or waterproof 'aquacell' dressing. You do not need to change your dressings if you do not want to -- you can just leave them clean, dry and covered until your follow up appointment 10-14 days after surgery
- Buy either 'mepore' or waterproof 'aquacell' dressings
- Buy 'mepore' dressings at pharmacy
- Buy waterproof 'aquacell' dressing at One Bracing @ Rebalance^{MD}. You may shower with the aquacell dressing on and it does not need to be changed.

Activity After a Collarbone Fracture:

- Do not use your broken arm to lift anything heavier than 1 lb (a large coffee mug) until you discuss with your surgeon - usually this is for the first 4-6 weeks after the break

- Wear your sling as directed by your surgeon - usually your surgeon will ask you to wear the sling full time for at least 4-6 weeks after the break or surgery
- Gradually resume normal activities like walking; recovery is gradual and it is normal to feel weak and tired for a couple of weeks after surgery
- Your surgeon will give you specific instructions about what kind of physiotherapy is recommended and when to begin
- Remove your arm from your sling 2-4 times per day to gently stretch out the hand, wrist and elbow
- Perform pendulum exercises as shown below starting within a few days of surgery
- Your surgeon will tell you if you need physiotherapy.

Tips for Living with a Sling:

- Many normally simple activities, like dressing, putting on shoes etc. can be more difficult with a sling on.
- This guide offers many tips on how to prepare for your time in a sling.
- Please review it prior to surgery and after.
- See:
http://rebalancemd.com/patient/downloads/Shoulder_Guide.pdf

Pain:

- Discomfort will be moderate for the first few days and will gradually get better
- Use any pain medications as prescribed by your surgeon
- Gradually reduce your pain medications as your pain decreases

Swelling & Bruising

- Expect swelling and bruising for a few weeks following the surgery. This is due to the trauma from the fracture and from the surgery.
- The swelling and bruising may go below the elbow into the wrist and hand or into the front of the chest.
- When resting, sit with the elbow and forearm supported with pillows and elevated

Icing:

- Apply ice packs or use a Cryo Therapy 'Ice Machine' to reduce pain and swelling
- Apply ice for 10-15 minutes, 4-6 times per day
- Never apply ice directly to skin

Return to Work:

- When you are able to return to work depends on:
 - the kind of job you have and its physical demands
 - how much pain & swelling you have after your injury
 - how your recovery is progressing
 - if you are able to modify your job or work from home
- Your surgeon will help you decide when to return to work
- Expect to take off at least 2-6 weeks for a desk job that does not require much use of both hands
- Expect to take off 3-4 months for more physically demanding work

Healthy Eating:

- Start with clear fluids after surgery
- Gradually increase to a well balanced diet as your appetite allows

- Drink at least 6 cups of fluids daily

Going to the Bathroom:

- Changes in medications, activity and diet can cause constipation (hard, dry bowel movements)
- To avoid constipation, drink lots of fluids, eat high fibre foods such as prunes, fruits, bran, whole grains and vegetables
- Take a stool softener or laxative if needed. Ask your surgeon or pharmacist to suggest one.

Driving:

- Do not drive while taking pain medications
- Discuss with your surgeon when it is safe to drive but expect that you will not be able to drive for at least 4-8 weeks after the break
- If your ability to safely drive (e.g swerve sharply, perform an emergency stop) is impaired, your insurance may not be valid in the case of an accident

Your Medications:

- Resume your regular medications unless instructed otherwise by your surgeon

Supplies/special equipment:

- A sling will be put on in the emergency department or operating room.
- **Upgraded Shoulder Sling:** If you find the sling supplied by the hospital quite irritating or uncomfortable, you may wish to buy a more padded sling which some patients find more comfortable. This is entirely optional. These can be bought at One Bracing @ Rebalance^{MD} or other medical supply stores such as McGill & Orme, Island Orthotics and others.

- **Cryotherapy "Ice Machines"**: are an alternative to ice packs. They can be extremely helpful to reduce pain and swelling. These can be bought at One Bracing @ Rebalance^{MD} or other medical supply stores such as McGill & Orme, Island Orthotics and others.
- **Waterproof Aquacell Dressing**: if you wish to shower, you may apply a waterproof Aquacell dressing. This type of dressing does not need to be changed after showering. You may purchase this at One Bracing @ Rebalance^{MD}

Follow Up Appointment:

- A post-operative appointment should be scheduled for approximately 10-14 days post surgery
- Call the office if you do not have an appointment scheduled
- Write down your questions for the surgeon before the appointment

Call your Surgeon if you have:

- Increasing pain or swelling that is not relieved by elevation, ice and pain medications
- Bleeding that continues even after applying direct pressure for 10-15 minutes
- Incisions that are red, puffy, hot or leaking fluid more than 48 hrs after surgery
- Fever greater than 38°C
- Signs of circulation problems (e.g coolness, change in skin colour, numbness) which is not relieved by rest
- Persistent nausea and vomiting
- Inability to pass urine for more than 8-10 hours
- Chest pain or shortness of breath that is unusual for you

If you cannot reach your Surgeon:

- Call your family doctor, go to a walk-in clinic or hospital emergency department

Non-emergency health information and services:

- HealthLinkBC www.healthlinkBC.ca
- Tel: 811 from anywhere in BC
- Tel: 711 for deaf and hearing impaired assistance (TTY)

Physiotherapy Exercises for Shoulder Surgery Patients

You may begin these exercises immediately after surgery unless told otherwise by your surgeon. Do the exercises 2-3 times per day for around 10 repetitions each each.

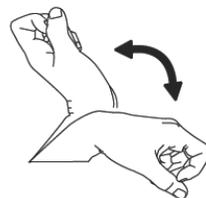
Your surgeon will give you a prescription to see a physiotherapist and tell you when to see a physiotherapist.

Elbow Movement Exercises:

1. Elbow Flexion-Extension: sitting up or lying down, take your sling off and keep your arm by your side. Straighten your elbow as far as possible. You can use your non-operated arm to help guide. If you have had a biceps tendon repair, do not do this exercise until approved by your surgeon.

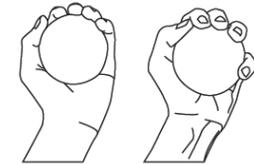


2. Wrist Flexion-Extension: Keeping your arm at your side, bend your wrist forwards and backwards as

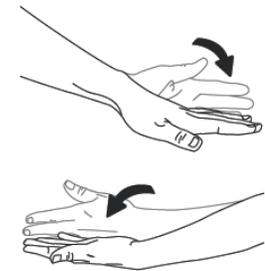


far as possible. You may need to help with your non-operated hand.

3. Grip: Make a fist or squeeze a rolled up cloth or tennis ball



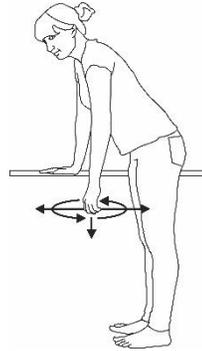
4. Palm Up/Palm Down: keeping your arm at your side, start in a hand shake position. Slowly rotate your palm down as fully as possible and up as fully as possible until you feel a stretch in your forearm. If you have had a biceps repair, do not do this exercise until approved by your surgeon.



Shoulder Pendular Swing Exercises

Spend about 15 minutes, 3 times a day exercising your shoulder.

- Rest your good arm on the edge of the table
- Bend over from your waist
- Allow your affected arm to hang down – it should hang limp and loose
- Swing the arm back and forth in a smooth pendular motion about 10 times
- Then allow the arm to circle gently in a clockwise direction with circles that grow gradually larger. Repeat 10 times.
- Now go counter clockwise. Repeat 10 times.



The information in this handout is intended only for the person it was given to by the health care team. It does not replace the advice or direction given to you by your surgeon.