

Information about Shoulder Fractures

Glasgow Royal Infirmary Fracture Clinic



What is my injury?

You have fractured a bone around the area of your shoulder. This can also sometimes be called a break, a broken bone or a crack but it all means the same thing.

What is a shoulder fracture and how does it get better?

A shoulder fracture is at the top of the upper arm bone (humerus), the shoulder blade (scapula) or the collar bone (clavicle). The bone can fracture in many different ways. Most of the time bones heal on their own. Sometimes the bone fractures in a way that means it will not heal on its own or it will not heal in a good position which means that you will not get good movement of your shoulder. We can tell this by looking at x-rays of your shoulder. If this is the case we may recommend that you have surgery. If surgery was needed we would fully discuss this with you.

The bone heals on its own a bit like gluing something together. 'Bone glue' is called callus and your body will naturally make it. It will take months for the callus to fully harden and your bone to become fully strong again.

What happens next?

You will come to fracture clinic around 1-2 weeks following your injury. You will see a member of our team, this may be a doctor, physiotherapist or nurse.

Sometimes when you come to fracture clinic you will have more x-rays taken. This lets us look at the position of the fracture in the first few weeks after your injury. Later on it will let us to see if the bone is healing.

The person you see will discuss your injury with you and what is the best way of managing your injury. This may include a discussion about surgery or it may be to let the fracture heal on its' own. Surgeries for fractures happen quickly so if you are going to have surgery it will normally happen in a day or two after your fracture clinic appointment or the following week at the latest.

If you don't need surgery you will wear a sling at first to help keep your arm still to let the fracture start to heal and the callus start to form. How long you wear the sling may be slightly different depending on your injury but most fractures mean you will need to wear a sling for 3 to 4 weeks.

When you are wearing the sling you can remove it to do gentle exercises. You should receive these exercises at your fracture clinic appointment. You can take the sling off for a short time and rest your arm on a pillow.

We will refer you to physiotherapy. This is an important part of shoulder injury recovery. It helps you get back the movement and strength in your shoulder.

You will sometimes come back to the fracture clinic about 6 or 8 weeks after your injury to check your recovery. This appointment is often with one of the fracture clinic nurses. You may not need another appointment. In this case if you have any questions or problems after your last appointment you can call us on the telephone numbers at the end of this leaflet. You can phone for advice or to make another appointment. You do not need to go back to your GP.

How long will it take to get better?

This will vary depending on how bad the fracture is and how quickly you heal. It can take 6 weeks but for most people it will take a between 3 to 9 months. There will still be improvements made up to a year following your injury. The pain and your movement will improve with time and what you can do with your arm will get better as the fracture heals.

What if I need surgery?

If you need surgery it could mean either

- Fixing the bones together with a plate and screws which helps your body heal the fracture in a better position
- Shoulder replacement surgery – if the fracture cannot be fixed by the techniques above

We will discuss this fully with you. It will mean that you have a general anaesthetic and will stay in hospital overnight.

Surgeries do carry risks of infection, scarring, damage to nerves and blood vessels, dislocation (of replacements) and failure or need for revision surgeries. That is why we only recommend surgery when it is felt that it will improve your long term pain and the movement of your shoulder.

Can there be any problems with a fracture?

There is a risk after any fracture that it might not heal (non-union). A fracture may also heal in a squint position (malunion) and this might cause the shoulder to look a slightly different shape from the uninjured one to or can lead to a loss of movement and full use of your shoulder. Fractures around the shoulder can also cause stiffness (frozen shoulder). Frozen shoulders will normally get better but they can mean it takes longer for you to recover from your injury.

What medication should be taken for pain relief?

When you have fractured a bone it can be very painful. Painkillers will not help the bone heal quicker but it will make you more comfortable while the bone heals. There are different painkillers you can take. If you are in a lot of pain you may need stronger painkillers such as cocodamol. For stronger painkillers you will need a prescription from your doctor but sometimes simpler over the counter painkiller such as paracetamol can be very helpful.

What can be done to strengthen bone?

It is important to think about general bone health, particularly after a fracture. A good healthy diet is very important. You may want to take calcium tablets if you do not take a lot of calcium in your diet.

Vitamin D is very important to helping fractures heal. Often people in Scotland are lacking in vitamin D due to the poor weather and lack of sunshine. This is even more so in winter. The recommended dose is 10 micrograms (400 International Units [IU]) a day. You can buy these supplements in chemists or supermarkets.

Smoking will slow down your bones from healing. If you do smoke please consider stopping.

Are there any medications that should be avoided?

There is some evidence that certain anti-inflammatory medications (NSAIDs) such as ibuprofen, diclofenac and naproxen can slow the fracture from healing. In a small number of cases this can lead to it not healing (non-union). It is therefore best to limit, where possible, taking any anti-inflammatory medication.

When can normal activities be started?

Times can vary for different people. This can be due to how quickly you heal, how bad the fracture was how much pain you are in after the fracture. You should be guided by what feels comfortable and take advice from your physiotherapist or doctor.

Work

This will depend on the type of work you do. For some desk based jobs you can go back to work an earlier, particular if transport is not an issue. Heavier physical jobs may take 8 to 12 weeks to return to.

Sport

Usually you can restart lighter sports 6 weeks after your injury and, contact sports after 12 weeks.

Driving

The key factor in driving safely is being able to control the steering and perform an emergency stop. You will also have to consider use of the hand-brake and gearstick. Most people return to driving by 6 weeks. You should check with your insurance company before driving.

Further Information:

Telephone Advice line: 0141 201 3715 (9am to 4.30pm Monday to Friday)

Appointments: 0141 201 3105 or **0141 201 3114** (8.30am to 5pm Monday to Friday).