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Wrist Postoperative Instructions

Distal Radius Fracture Repair (ORIF)

Splint and dressing

Keep your splint and dressing in place until your first postoperative visit, usually 7-10 days after surgery. Keep them clean and dry. Do not remove padding, trim the splint, or place anything inside it. Contact the office if the splint becomes wet, damaged, or uncomfortably tight.

Activity and movement

Do not lift, push, pull, grip forcefully, or bear weight through the operated hand. Do not use this hand to push up from a chair. Gently open and close your fingers and move your thumb frequently while awake. Move your elbow and shoulder as allowed by the splint. Do not begin wrist exercises or forearm rotation until instructed. A sling may be used for comfort while up and about.

Elevation, ice, and sleeping

Rest with your hand above heart level on pillows, especially during the first 48-72 hours. Support the forearm and hand on pillows while sleeping. Apply a wrapped cold pack over the splint for 15-20 minutes at a time. Keep the dressing dry. Do not sleep with ice in place or apply ice to numb skin.

Showering

You may shower after 48 hours if you feel steady and can keep the entire splint and dressing dry with a waterproof cover. Keep the arm out of the water stream. Do not soak the wrist in a bathtub, pool, or hot tub. Leave the dressing in place until your follow-up visit unless instructed otherwise.

Pain medication and nerve block

Take medication only as prescribed and follow your discharge medication instructions. Do not combine products containing acetaminophen (Tylenol). Do not drink alcohol or drive while taking opioid pain medication. If you received a nerve block, protect the numb arm from heat, pressure, and injury. Follow the anesthesia team's instructions and contact them if numbness or weakness lasts beyond the expected duration.

Follow-up and therapy

Schedule your first visit approximately 7-10 days after surgery. Your incision and splint will be checked, and X-rays may be taken. Suture removal, transition to a removable brace, and hand therapy will be arranged as appropriate. Do not start strengthening until cleared. Do not drive until you are off opioid medication and cleared to safely control the vehicle.

Common concerns

Mild bruising, swelling, and discomfort are common early after surgery. These should gradually improve. Gentle finger motion and elevation can help reduce swelling and stiffness.

Call the office promptly: 212-737-3301

Call for fever above 101.3°F, chills, increasing redness, foul-smelling drainage, bleeding that soaks the dressing, or worsening pain despite medication and elevation. New or worsening numbness, very tight swelling, cold/pale/blue fingers, or inability to move your fingers require urgent evaluation. If you cannot reach us promptly, go to the emergency department. **Call 911 for chest pain or difficulty breathing.**

These instructions apply to routine wrist fracture repair. Follow any procedure-specific instructions provided by Dr. Wessling.