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SPLINTS & CASTS

In order to support and protect injured bones and soft tissue, doctors may recommend you wear a splint or cast. A splint or cast can reduce pain, swelling and muscle spasms. Splints, also referred to as “half-casts,” offer less support than casts; however, they can be adjusted to accommodate swelling from injuries. Your doctor will decide the type of support that works best for you.

Types of splints and casts

Casts are custom-made of either plaster or fiberglass. They will be applied by your doctor or an assistant. Splints or half-casts also can be custom-made, but a ready-made splint will often be used. These off-the-shelf splints are available in a variety of shapes and sizes. They have Velcro® straps, which make the splints easy to adjust and to put on and take off. Your doctor will explain how to use your injured arm or leg while it is healing and how to adjust your splint to accommodate swelling.
**Wearing a splint or cast**

Follow your doctor’s instructions carefully. The information that follows is to be used as general guidelines only and should not be used as a substitute for your doctor’s advice.

Your injury may cause swelling and resulting pressure in your splint or cast for the first 48 to 72 hours. If this happens:

- Elevate your injured arm or leg above your heart by propping it up on pillows or some other support. Recline if the splint or cast is on your leg.
- Move your uninjured fingers or toes gently and often.
- Apply ice to the splint or cast. Loosely wrap a dry plastic bag with ice or an ice pack around the splint or cast at the point of injury.

**How are splints and casts applied?**

Padding, usually cotton, is used as a protective layer next to the skin between it and the fiberglass or plaster. The fit of the splint or cast must be correct to provide the desired support. Generally, the splint or cast also covers the joint above and below the fractured bone.

A splint may be applied initially to an injury and, as swelling subsides, a full cast may replace it.

**NOTE:** If your injured bone begins to swell, apply ice to the splint or cast and elevate your leg.

Sometimes, it may be necessary to replace a cast as swelling decreases and the cast becomes “too big.” Often as a fracture heals, a splint may be applied again to allow easy removal for therapy.
Warning signs

After application of a splint or cast, elevate your injured arm or leg well above the heart for 24 to 72 hours. Rest and elevation will reduce your pain and speed the healing process by minimizing early swelling.

Contact your physician if you experience any of the following symptoms:

- Increased pain and the feeling that the splint or cast is too tight
- Numbness and tingling in your hand or foot
- Burning and stinging
- Excessive swelling below the cast
- Loss of active movement of toes or fingers, which requires an urgent evaluation by your doctor

Caring for your splint or cast

- Keep your splint or cast dry. Use two layers of plastic or purchase waterproof shields to keep your splint or cast dry while you shower or bathe.
- Do not walk on a “walking cast” until it is completely dry and hard. It takes about one hour for fiberglass and two to three days for plaster to become hard enough to walk on.
- Keep dirt, sand and powder away from the inside of your splint or cast.
- Do not pull out the padding from your splint or cast.
- Do not stick objects such as coat hangers inside the splint or cast to scratch itching skin. Do not apply powders or deodorants to itching skin. If itching persists, contact your doctor.
- Do not break off rough edges of the cast or trim the cast before asking your doctor.
- Inspect the skin around the cast. If your skin becomes red or raw around the cast, contact your doctor.
- Inspect the cast regularly. If it becomes cracked or develops soft spots, contact your doctor’s office.

Removing your cast

To avoid cutting your skin and to ensure proper healing, never remove the cast yourself. Your doctor will use a cast saw to remove your cast. The saw vibrates but does not rotate. If the blade of the saw touches the padding inside the hard shell of the cast, the padding will vibrate with the blade and will protect your skin. Cast saws make noise and may feel “hot” from friction, but they will not harm you.

Always contact your physician with any questions or concerns regarding your cast or splint.

Reference: Care of Casts and Splints, American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons®, June 2004