

Care of your Plaster Cast

What is a plaster cast and why do I need it?

Casts are used to immobilise, or reduce the movement of, a bone or joint where there has been a fracture or soft tissue injury. They are used for healing, protection or correction.

How long do I need to wear my cast?

The time varies depending on your injury. Your treating clinician will tell you more. It is common for an initial back slab “trauma cast” to be on for one to two weeks, whereas a full cast can be around four to six weeks.

What types of cast are there?

Back slab “trauma cast”: This type of cast is made from Plaster of Paris or Fibreglass and only covers between 50%-75% of the injured limb. This allows room for post-injury swelling to occur.

Full cast: This type of cast is made from Plaster of Paris, synthetic material, or a combination of both. Full casts are generally applied after the post-injury swelling reduces. These types of cast cover the entirety of the effected limb and can remain on for longer periods of time

What should I expect when I have a plaster cast on?

The cast or back slab should feel snug and supportive. It should not be too loose or too tight.

Signs your plaster cast might be too tight

- Discomfort of the limb, with tingling or pins and needles

- Change of temperature of the limb, particularly when compared to the non-affected limb
- Change of colour of the limb, if it is dusky blue/white
- Excessive swelling of the fingers or toes of the limb
- Increased pain or burning sensation
- Pain which is not relieved by elevation
- Inability to move fingers or toes
- Continued pressure at one point beneath the plaster cast.

What do I do if any of this happens?

- It is common to experience increased swelling in the first 72 hours after a fracture. To manage this, and reduce this swelling, you should ensure you elevate your injured limb.
- **Arms:** wear the sling (if prescribed/required) when you are moving about. When you are resting, place your arm on pillows, with the limb elevated above the level of your heart



- **Legs:** When you are resting, place the leg on 2-3 pillows, so that the limb is elevated above the level of your heart.



- Immediately attend your local doctor or hospital with any concerns about your injury or cast if despite elevating the affected limb for 1 hour:
 - the swelling continues
 - the colour does not improve
 - you experience excessive pain, which is not relieved by usual painkillers
 - you feel increasing pins and needles/numbness in the cast limb
 - you are unable to move your fingers/toes.

Care of your plaster cast

- Keep your plaster cast dry.
- Elevate the arm or leg as outlined above
- **EXERCISE:** It is important to keep your unaffected/non-injured joints moving. Gentle exercises help prevent weakness, stiffness and reduce swelling. Exercise the parts of your arm or leg, which are not included in the cast, as instructed by your treating clinician
 - Exercise your fingers or toes on the limb with the cast 4-5 times a day
 - Exercise the joints above and below the cast at least 4 times a day.
- Use crutches and walking aids and suitable footwear as instructed.

Do NOT

- Get your plaster cast wet as it may lead to skin irritation or infection
- Swim in your cast or get sand inside your cast
- Walk or stand on your cast, they are not meant for weight bearing
- Put anything down your cast to scratch (eg knitting needles and rulers) as this could cause a cut or sore and lead to infection
- Alter the cast by cutting it.

Showering instructions

- When showering, you must keep your cast dry.
- The preferred method is to wrap a towel around the cast, including covering the top of the cast area and keep out of water. The towels will absorb most of the excess moisture.
- Avoid showers for leg casts.

Follow up/contact

- It is important to attend all follow up appointments relating to your injury/cast
- If the cast becomes cracked, loose or soft, or if you have any concerns, please see your local doctor, your local emergency department or phone the Orthopaedic Technicians at the Townsville University Hospital Plaster Room (Monday-Friday, 8am-4pm on 4433 2710).