**FAQs AFTER HAND SURGERY**

**General instructions**:

Postoperative days 1-3

It is normal to have swelling after hand surgery, and swelling is a cause of pain.

1. Swelling and pain will be less if you keep your hand/arm above your heart.
2. Keeping an ice pack in your armpit or in the bend in your elbow may also decrease swelling and pain. Fill a plastic bag with ice cubes, wrap the bag in a towel, keep it on the arm for about 10-20 minutes at a time several times an hour for 3 days then as needed.
3. If you can use ibuprofen, taking it at scheduled times for the first three days helps decrease swelling and inflammation. The maximum dose is 800 mg every 8 hours. Take it with food to decrease the chances of getting an upset stomach.

Wound care

If allowed by your surgeon, it is generally safe to remove your bandage 3 days after surgery. If allowed, you may also wash your hand and blot it dry with a clean towel. If the wound has been closed with stitches, there is no need to apply ointment. Do not soak the hand in a tub. Do not swim unless cleared by your surgeon.

If you have been told to keep the bandage on but have increasing swelling, loss of feeling, increasing pain, or color changes in the fingers, you may try to first loosen the ace bandage. If this is not helping, contact the surgeon’s office for advice. If this occurs at night or on the weekend, seek medical care at the Emergency Department or an Urgent Care Center.

Splint/cast care

Most splints and casts applied in the operating room cannot get wet. For showering, waterproof cast covers can be purchased on-line or in some medical supply stores. You may also cover the casted part of the arm with a towel and a plastic bag and tape the bag closed.

Sutures

Most stitches are removed between 10-14 days after surgery. Sometimes, dissolvable sutures are placed under the skin. These may take months to fully dissolve and they occasionally “spit” through the skin. This is not dangerous.

Activity

If some or all of your fingers have been left free of the bandage, you may gently move them. See the hand exercises below. Gentle motion can decrease swelling and stiffness. If an area is being supported by a splint or cast, you should not try to move it.

Slings

Slings may throw your balance off. If not needed to immobilize the shoulder, you should avoid the use of a sling or be very cautious when walking.

Cold intolerance

It is not uncommon to have cold intolerance after surgery on the hand or after hand injuries. It can last for years, but it generally improves after the first 18 months. Usually, the only thing to be done is to wear gloves or mittens. Rarely, Botox can be considered if there is only one involved finger.

Pain

The main reason there is pain after surgery is swelling or inflammation. Usually, the peak time for this is the first 3 days after surgery. The best ways to limit swelling, inflammation, and pain are ice, elevation, ibuprofen (or other NSAID medication), and rest. NSAIDs should be taken with food to limit stomach upset. Ibuprofen has the lowest rate of stomach upset. Opioid/narcotic pain medication should be taken for as short a period as possible as it has high risk for abuse, addiction, habituation, nausea, vomiting, constipation, unsteadiness, increased pain, and unintended inappropriate use by others. Being anxious increases the severity of pain, so deep breathing and relaxation techniques are helpful for both pain and anxiety management. Smoking increases pain.

**Q: What are normal, expected post-operative changes?**

**A:** Aching and throbbing of the hand and swelling and bruising are all common. If local anesthetic has been injected at the time of surgery, it may be a day before sensation improves. Discomfort is improved by elevation, ice, ibuprofen (if tolerated). It may not be possible to get rid of all pain in the immediate days after surgery. Bruising may take about 2 weeks to go away. In the time after surgery, pain is normal. Swelling is normal. Stiffness is normal. Scarring is normal. Duration of those symptoms is determined by the injury, the type of surgery and the location of the surgery.

**Q: What are warning signs to look out for after *any* type of surgery?**

**A:** Please call if you are experiencing any of the following: temperature > 101.5 oF, redness, warmth, significant drainage of pus or blood, shortness of breath, chest pain, calf pain, dizziness, fainting, blurry/double vision, pain not adequately controlled with pain medication, severe headache, severe diarrhea.

**Q: What are warning signs to look out for after hand surgery?**

**A:** increased swelling or pain that isn’t improved with ice, elevation, and pain medication; purple or pale color of fingertips despite loosening an ace wrap; red streaks going up the arm; changes in sensation of the hand; excessive bleeding (bright red blood soaking the bandage).

**Q: Will I need hand therapy?**

**A:** Most people do not need hand therapy after surgery unless the surgery is complex and a specific recovery protocol needs to be followed. If you have an unexpected degree of stiffness, swelling, or hypersensitivity, hand therapy may be helpful.

**Q: When can I return to work?**

**A:** This depends on the degree of complexity of your surgery and the demands of your job. This should be discussed with your hand surgeon. For very simple procedures, 1-3 days off may be fine. For complex reconstructive procedures, several weeks off of work and several months of not using the operated hand fully may be needed.

**Q: When can I resume exercise?**

**A:** Go for walks as soon as possible. Be careful on uneven ground, and avoid walking a dog or doing activities that put you at risk for falls. No heavy lifting for 6-12 weeks after surgery depending on the surgery. Discuss specific limitations with your surgeon or hand therapist before surgery.

**Q: Will my hand be normal after surgery?**

**A:** There are no guarantees associated with surgery. We attempt to provide the best quality care to improve your situation. No surgery is perfect. Function of the hand depends on the injury and/or type of surgery.

**Q: What can I do to get the best result possible?**

**A:** Get plenty of rest, do not smoke, do not drink alcohol, do not drive a car until your hand is functioning as normally as possible, eat a balanced diet (avoid processed or fast food, eat vegetables and fruit, avoid soda), follow your surgeon’s and/or hand therapist’s instructions.

**Q: What are potential side effects of surgery?**

**A:** Stiffness, swelling, scarring, numbness along the incision line, increased pain, hypersensitivity, infection, poor healing, and cold intolerance are all possible.

**Call our office during office hours for the following**: Questions about medications, clinic appointments, post-operative restrictions, other questions related to your hand. Please avoid going to the Emergency Department for questions related to surgery without trying to contact us first.

**Call your primary care doctor:**  if any other medical condition you have seems to get worse in the period after surgery

**Call 911** – if you have a sudden crisis that has to do with anything other than your arm such as symptoms of a heart attack or other serious event