

POST-OPERATIVE ADVICE FOR WRIST & THUMB-BASE SURGERY

Your hand has been placed in a dressing/plaster that holds the wrist and thumb in the optimum position for comfort and to protect the operation site. Hand elevation and light use is important to prevent swelling and stiffness of the fingers.

You may have been discharged with a sling. This is only necessary if you have received a nerve block and/or for travelling home. The sling should then be used sparingly and removed regularly to prevent shoulder and elbow stiffness. A sling is not necessary at night.

The fingers and thumb-tip should be moved and used. Try to use the hand for normal light tasks when it is fine for the hand to be lowered. However, remember not to walk with your hand dangling, or to sit with your hand held in your lap, particularly in early weeks after your operation.

Two weeks after the operation, your dressing/plaster will be changed to a lighter splint. If the wound is satisfactory, it will be left open. However, it is advisable to place a piece of gauze between wound and splint when it is worn to prevent sweating and/or skin maceration, which encourage infection. There obviously will be some swelling and bruising. Look out for any redness or tenderness in the area around the wound that might indicate an infection. Do not apply antiseptic but please contact my secretary if you have any worries.

At this stage, you can remove your splint each day to exercise the thumb and wrist gently, to bathe or if you are sitting quietly to let the air at the wound. Once dressings are removed, it is safe to get the hand wet in a bath or shower but avoid contact with soap, shampoo or dirty water. Wounds and the surrounding skin can become dry and flaky. If this occurs, briefly immerse the whole hand in water to which a small quantity of baby-oil has been added. Commercial moisturisers are best avoided until wounds have healed as they can cause irritation.

Your stitches will be dissolving by about two weeks after surgery but wounds are not sealed until a further week. During this time, avoid contact with livestock and agricultural environments, including gardening. Gloves are no protection against the risk of infection.

Four weeks after the operation, you can begin to take off your splint during the day for light use. However, it is worth wearing it for protection or at night for at least six weeks after the operation. Physiotherapy will now be started and aimed at recovering thumb and wrist movements. In general, be guided by symptoms and if an activity hurts, it is probably best avoided

Recovery of power after these operations is very slow. You will not be able to use the hand heavily for at least three months from surgery. A return to driving requires you to have regained full finger movements and to have sufficient power to control the vehicle. Timing of your return to work is variable according to your occupation and requires some judgement.

Once healed, scars may become lumpy, firm, tender and pink. The intensity and length of the period of "scar immaturity" is very variable and may take many months to settle. It can be helped by massaging scars and surrounding area firmly with the moisturizing cream.