

Cast Care

What is a cast?

A cast is a supportive structure that surrounds an injured body part to protect it, keep it from moving, and allow it to heal. Casts are made of fiberglass or plaster. They are most often used for broken bones. They are also used sometimes for torn ligaments or tendons and may be used after surgery.

How is a cast put on?

Your health care provider will first place padding around your injured body part. Casting material is then rolled like a bandage over the padding. While the casting material hardens, it will feel warm.

How is a cast removed?

Your health care provider will remove the cast with a special cast saw. The saw is designed so that it will not cut your skin. The cast should be removed only by your provider.

How long will I need to wear my cast?

How long you wear your cast depends on your injury. Some injuries heal within a few weeks and some take several months.

How can I take care of myself?

- ▶ **Pain and swelling:** Take acetaminophen or ibuprofen for the first 48 hours. You should elevate your leg or arm above the level of your heart to reduce swelling. If your leg is in a cast, sit down and put pillows under your leg to keep it elevated for the first 24 hours. If your provider has given you a sling for your arm, wear it to keep the injured part elevated. Wiggling your fingers and toes can also reduce swelling.
- ▶ **Dryness:** Most casts should not get wet. A plaster cast will fall apart if it gets wet. A fiberglass cast won't fall apart but the padding underneath may start to smell if it gets wet. Wet padding may also hurt your skin. You can bathe using a wet washcloth, rather than taking a shower or bath. If you are going to be near water (even rain), put your cast in a heavy plastic bag. Hold the bag in place

with a rubber band. Try not to get the bag wet. If your cast does get wet, you can dry it with a hair dryer. If your cast gets wet and it doesn't feel dry after 4 or 5 hours, call your health care provider.

Your health care provider may give you a special cast and liner that allows you to get the cast wet and even swim.

- ▶ **Itching:** Many people have itching inside a cast. Never reach inside a cast with your fingernails or another object to scratch. It may injure your skin and cause an infection. Sometimes shaking a small amount of talcum powder inside a cast or using a hair dryer on a cool setting helps relieve the itching.
- ▶ **Activity:** How active you can be depends on your injury. You should avoid riding a bike or playing sports. If you have a cast on your leg, you should not walk on it or put any body weight on it for the first 48 hours. The cast needs time to dry and become strong. If your provider wants you to use a walker or crutches, you should not put any weight on the injured leg at all. Ask your health care provider about what activities you can safely do.

After my cast is put on what problems should I watch for?

Contact your health care provider immediately if you have any of these problems.

- ▶ **Swelling:** Signs of problem swelling include:
 1. You have severe or persistent pain.
 2. Your fingers or toes feel numb or painful or can't move.
 3. The color of your fingernails or toenails changes.
- ▶ **Infection:** Sometimes the body part inside a cast becomes infected. Signs of infection include:
 1. drainage from the skin under the cast
 2. pain
 3. fever.
- ▶ **Cast fit:** After a while the cast may not fit well. Call your health care provider if the cast feels too loose or too tight. Talk to your provider if the cast is damaged or weakened due to wear and tear.