

# Dr Coll's exercises after Wrist Surgery

Swelling is the enemy. Fingers that stay swollen for more than 3-4 weeks, will have increased risk of ongoing stiffness for many months.

There is a balance between pain and swelling. Swollen fingers need to move to milk the fluid out of them, and painful fingers need to rest, to allow them to heal.

Pain relief is an option, but it is important to remember this may give you a false sense of security as they mask the pain.

Wrist reconstructive surgery requires a cast or brace usually worn for 6 weeks. Carpal tunnel surgery requires a bandage for 1-2 days but no brace.

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## Exercises to start day 1 after wrist surgery:

1. Fully straighten fingers - tip: some people can actually over-extend their fingers, so check the other hand to see what you are aiming for
2. Hook grip - this is an infrequently used grip for grasping luggage handles and so on. It encourages all the finger joints to move
3. Knuckle flexion - this straightens the fingers but works the knuckles



4. Fist - starting with a light, half fist, gradually work the fingers towards the palm over time  
You can curl your fingers down using the other hand to cover it, if you don't have pain but are still noticing swelling or stiffness.

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You are also welcome to try to use your fingers for light tasks.

Some of these would include:

- Cleaning your teeth
- Toileting yourself

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- Using a fork (but not a knife)
- You can move your elbow, but you may not be able to twist your arm
- If your shoulder is sore or tired, you can wear a sling but it tends to cause swollen fingers if used too much, and you are not supplied with one for that reason.

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It is better to avoid:

- lifting a kettle
- Twisting your wrist (you may need to put your laptop on your knees while reclining on a couch)
- Removing any brace or cast you have on your arm - this should be done by a health professional unless specifically instructed
- Cutting meat or hard vegetables

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After your **cast or brace** is removed: (Usually at 6 weeks after surgery)

1. You are usually permitted to use your hand and wrist as you are able
2. Some patients will receive a step down option such as a splint or small brace. You will be given instructions as to how often and when to use it.
3. You are welcome to grip with your fingers as your pain allows
4. You are welcome to move your wrist doing normal activities as your pain allows.

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Simple wrist exercises after your brace / splint is removed

1. Flexion - gently bend your wrist downwards. You may have a tight feeling across the back of your wrist, this is normal and you can push a little further, but stop if you have pain that doesn't settle.
2. Extension - gently bend your wrist backwards yourself - do not use your other hand to push your wrist.
3. Rotation - this is limited by your pain - turn your hand palm up and then palm down. Feel into any pain and use it as a guide.

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Advanced exercises (usually after 3 months)

1. Once your pain has settled you can start to push the joint backwards and forwards to free it up - there will be a gentle stretching pain and tightness, so you can hold that position and rest into it before you relax again.

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2. The fingers also benefit from stretching into full straightening and a fist with the assistance of the other hand once the pain has settled.
3. Lifting - simple lifting with the palm up or down (with the wrist straight) is usually comfortable, and you can test the strength of your wrist once you are out of a brace.
4. Lifting cartons from the fridge or kettles involve twisting and this may take more time - you can use your other hand to help you lift
5. Wrist flexion and extension strengthening can begin once your pain settles - you can start with a 500g weight (or can!) and gently flex your wrist back and forth over the edge of a table. You can increase your weight limit as your pain allows.

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### Returning to exercise / sport (usually after 6 months)

1. Keeping the wrist straight allows you to return to gym exercises at any stage after 6 weeks - wrist curls, biceps curls and chest press will strain the wrist joint, so are best left until the wrist itself is strong
2. Sport - impact sport requires strong wrist muscles - the forearm muscle bulk should be the same size as the other side. Falling onto your wrist carries the same risk of injury as the initial injury and should be avoided for 6-12 months after surgical repair.
3. Water sports - pushing up on a surfboard requires significant wrist extension and may be painful - starting slow and not expecting too much of yourself on your first day is a good idea. Skiing pulls on the wrist in a straight position and this may be tolerable earlier. Swimming is fine once the brace is removed

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### Returning to work

1. It's helpful to think about your normal work tasks - the duration you spend at a computer or on a machine is helpful to think about to plan your medical certification and return to work
2. It is possible to start on shorter days, but you need to think about your driving distance to ensure you can manage the time you hope to spend in total.
3. Think about your lifting ability - notice at home what you are able to do, and think about equivalent work tasks.
4. The best time to return to work, is when you are able to manage your tasks at home, your wrist is strong and your colleagues are able to help you when you are unable to complete every aspect of your duties.

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