

## Orthopaedics Department

# Treatment of Ankle Fractures

Your surgeon has recommended that you have an operation to treat your ankle fracture. The following information aims to help you make an informed decision about whether to go ahead with this operation.

If you have any questions or need any further information, please ask your surgeon or any member of your healthcare team.

### **What is an ankle fracture?**

An ankle fracture is a break of one or both of your ankle bones (we use the words 'fracture' and 'break' to mean the same thing). Problems can occur with your ankle if the bones heal in an incorrect position and sometimes an operation is recommended to fix the bones in the correct position.

### **How does an ankle fracture happen?**

Ankle fractures are usually caused by a twisting injury to the ankle resulting from sport or a simple fall or trip. There may be a break of the bone on the outer side of the ankle, the inner side, or both sides. There may also be damage to the ankle ligaments.

### **Are there any alternatives to surgery?**

If the bones stay in a good position, some ankle fractures can be treated using a plaster cast. For ankle fractures where the bones will not stay in a good position an operation to fix the bones is recommended.



## Patient Information

### **What will happen if I decide not to have the operation?**

You will be treated using a plaster cast. You will need to keep the weight off your leg by using crutches or a walking frame to move about. You will need regular X-rays to check the position of the bones in the plaster.

It is better to perform the operation within about three weeks of the injury. If the bones stay out of position after this time, the fracture will heal in an incorrect position and the ankle may not function well.

### **My ankle is very swollen and bruised.**

More than 60% of the ankle fractures would present with significant swelling on the day of injury. If your ankle is very swollen your surgeon will not operate straight away. You will have to wait for the swelling to go down. This may take as long as 7-10 days.

You may be sent home with advice on keeping the ankle raised and ice application.

You can help reduce the swelling by raising your leg as high as possible (above the level of groin) on pillows. Packed ice applied to the area also helps to reduce the swelling.

A Specialist nurse will contact you by telephone to address any concerns you might have.

### **What are fracture blisters?**

If your ankle is very swollen sometimes fracture blisters will occur over the fracture site, this normally occurs within 48 hours after injury.

Whether you go to theatre straight away depends on the nature, number and site of these blisters as there is a small risk of infection. You may need to wait for the fracture blisters to heal prior to surgery.

Please do not pop them as this may increase the risk of infection. You can help by keeping your leg highly raised on pillows. Packed ice will also help with the swelling.

## Patient Information

### What does the operation involve?

One or more cuts are made to expose the broken bones on the inner and outer sides of the ankle. The fractures are usually fixed using screws and a plate. The cuts are then closed with stitches or staples.



### Possible complications

- You will be given pain relief to control the pain. It is important to take it as instructed so you can move about as advised.
- Scarring of the skin (although ankle wounds usually heal to a neat scar).
- Blood clots in the legs (thrombosis). These can occasionally move through the bloodstream to the lungs (embolus), causing breathing difficulties (risk less than 1 in a 100). You will be encouraged to get out of bed soon after surgery, drink plenty of fluids and will be given a daily injection to reduce the risks of blood clots.
- If you have difficulty in passing urine you may need a catheter for a day or two.

### Complications specific to this operation

- Infection. If this occurs it will be treated with antibiotics or occasionally a further operation. Infection can sometimes stop the fracture healing.

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- Loosening or breaking of the plate and screws. This can happen if the bone is very soft or if too much weight is placed on the leg before the fracture has healed properly. A further operation is usually needed.
- Continued tenderness over the plate and screws. It is possible to have a further operation to remove the plate and screws when the fracture has healed; but they are not usually removed unless they cause problems.
- Stiffness and swelling of ankle are common but improve to certain extent with time and physiotherapy.
- Bones may not heal or may heal in a wrong position requiring further surgery.
- You may develop arthritis in the ankle and highly depends on the severity of injury.

### **How soon will I recover?**

After the operation you will be transferred from the recovery room back to the ward. You may have plaster cast on to protect and support your ankle or just a crepe bandage.

The physiotherapists will help you to start walking again. At first, you will not be allowed to place much weight on your ankle and you will need to use crutches or a walking frame.

Most patients go home within two days. If you smoke try to stop as nicotine is known to prevent fractures from healing.

### **Going Home**

During the first couple of weeks you will need to keep your leg raised on pillows or a footstool, as much as possible to help keep the swelling down. As you begin to move about more, remember to use your walking aids as instructed.

You will be asked to go to the fracture clinic to check that the fracture is healing properly; an appointment will be sent to you.

## Patient Information

Your ankle may be kept in a plaster cast until the bones heal, which usually takes 6-8 weeks.

Your surgeon and physiotherapists will advise you when you can place weight on your ankle and you will be given exercises to help your ankle start moving again. It can take several months before you are able to return to normal activities.

**If you have any problems or concerns, please contact your GP.**

### What about the future?

Most patients make a good recovery after surgery with a return to good mobility of the ankle. Often, it could take 3 to 6 months to return routine activities. However, your ankle may never be quite as strong as it was before the injury. Some swelling and mild stiffness is common and can last for several months after the fracture has healed. There is a risk of developing arthritis due to the injury itself, but it is uncommon.

### Further Information

For further information, please contact the Orthopaedic Department on: 024 7696 5079.

The Trust has access to interpreting and translation services. If you need this information in another language or format please contact 024 7696 5079 and we will do our best to meet your needs.

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#### Document History

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