

Elbow Fracture Recovery

What You Need to Know

What Is an Elbow Fracture?

Elbow fractures involve a break in one or more of the three bones that form the elbow joint — the humerus (upper arm), the radius, or the ulna (forearm bones). Common elbow fractures include radial head fractures (from falling on an outstretched arm), olecranon fractures (the bony tip of the elbow), and distal humerus fractures (the lower end of the upper arm). Each has its own treatment approach and recovery timeline.

What Can I Expect in Recovery?

Weeks 1–4: Protection and early motion

- Non-displaced fractures treated in a cast or splint for 2–6 weeks depending on type
- Surgical cases: early controlled motion typically begins within days to weeks
- Finger and shoulder movement encouraged from day one to prevent stiffness
- Swelling management: elevation and ice are important

Weeks 4–8: Restoring motion

- Physical therapy focuses intensively on elbow range of motion — flexion, extension, and forearm rotation
- The elbow is one of the stiffest joints in the body after immobilization — early motion is critical
- Gentle progressive stretching and joint mobilization

Weeks 8–16: Strengthening and function

- Progressive strengthening of the entire arm
- Return to work and activity based on fracture type and healing

Why Is Early Motion So Important for the Elbow?

The elbow is uniquely prone to stiffness and contracture after injury or surgery. Even a few weeks of immobilization can result in significant loss of range of motion that is very difficult to recover. This is why physical therapy often begins very early after elbow fractures — within

days in many surgical cases — even before the bone is fully healed.

When Should I Be Concerned?

- Signs of infection after surgery: fever, increasing redness, discharge, or warmth
- Numbness or tingling in the hand — nerve involvement
- Complete loss of forearm rotation or elbow flexion despite PT
- Increasing rather than decreasing pain after the first few weeks

The Good News

With early, consistent physical therapy, most elbow fractures heal with excellent functional outcomes. The most important factor in your recovery — after the quality of the fracture repair — is how early and consistently you engage with PT. Starting quickly and working diligently on motion is what prevents permanent stiffness.

With dedicated early PT, most patients regain functional elbow motion within **3 to 6 months**.

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