

Argus Orthopaedic Zone

Beware Of The "Wrist Sprain"

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Transforming patient information into patient understanding.

Wrist sprains are fairly simple and straightforward; kind of like a sprained ankle, right?

Ah, not really. Let's look at this a little more closely.

You fall and the natural response is to put your hands out to catch yourself. As you land on your palm, your wrist bends backwards. This can partially tear ligaments in the wrist - or worse. Much worse.

So you have a sprain. Or do you?

Signs and Symptoms

Signs and symptoms of a wrist sprain can vary in intensity and location, depending on the degree of injury.

- Swelling in the wrist
- Pain at the time of injury
- Persistent pain when you move the wrist
- Bruising or discoloration of the skin
- Tenderness at the injured site
- A feeling of a pop or tearing inside the wrist
- A warm or feverish feeling to the skin

Degrees of Injury

Wrist sprains are graded on the degree of injury to the tissues.

- Grade 1. Mild, ligaments are stretched, not torn. Most common injury to the wrist.
- Grade 2. Moderate, ligaments torn. Some loss of function.
- Grade 3. The bad one. Significant injury. Ligaments torn all the way through. The ligament may take a small chip of bone with it.

Diagnosis

I can only tell you how I do it and how it should be done. I take a careful history of what happened and learn if there were previous injuries to the hand and wrist.

The physical exam should include the entire hand, wrist and arm to the shoulder.

In most cases I will have an x-ray taken. Sometimes an MRI or CT scan is necessary for accurate diagnosis.

Treating a Wrist Sprain

Mild wrist sprains respond to:

- Rest the joint for 2 days
- Elevate for at least 1 day
- Ice for 20 minutes at a time. No heat.
- Splint for 48 hours and then re-evaluate.

If at the second to third day symptoms are still significant, I continue splinting for 7 - 10 days.

A severe wrist sprain may require surgery to correct it. I use MRI a lot to decide if I need to operate on an injured wrist. Everyone doesn't need an MRI if they have sprained their wrist. I like to be the one to decide about MRI because they are very expensive and not routinely needed. Severe wrist sprains can take weeks to months to heal.

A closer look

Sprains of the wrist seem simple if you don't think about "what else". Early diagnosis is really important!

As an Orthopaedic Surgeon I know all the "what elses" because I see them all the time.

- A fracture of the end of the forearm bone (radius and ulna)
- A fracture of one of the 8 little carpal (wrist) bones
- Torn ligaments between 2 or more carpal bones allowing them to shift
- A tear of a cartilage structure on the little finger side of the wrist
- Dislocation of bones

Happy Ending

The wrist is one of the most complicated areas in the body. It is really a miracle of nature.

Because it is so complex, injuries can hide in it. If I think of the possibilities and make the correct diagnosis early, treatment can be very effective and the end result can be good.

Wrist injuries are really a perfect example of what I say each week in closing.

Our goal is simple - To help people return to more pain free, functional lives. I specialize in you.

Please access our office teaching website www.orthopodsurgeon.com and Your Orthopaedic Connection for more information about wrists and all the things I treat in the hospital and office.

Good health. Good life. All the best to you.

Be well.

Dr. Haverbush