WRIST FRACTURE

By

Cathryn Noble, Occupational Therapist

**Dr. Hendler:** Hello, and welcome to KP Healthcast. I’m your host, Dr. Peter Hendler and today, our guest is Cathryn (Cathy) Noble, who has been with Kaiser Permanente for eight years, and is an Occupational Therapist and specifically, a hand therapist.

Cathy works out of Union City but also covers Hayward and Fremont Kaiser. Today, she will be talking about wrist fracture therapy. Thanks for coming.

**Cathy:** Thank you.

**Dr. Hendler:** My first question. I’ve just come out of the cast after breaking my wrist and the doctor says I can start moving it. What can I do about the swelling so I can move more easily?

**Cathy:** One of the things that’s very helpful with swelling is what we call contrast baths. For that, you will need two pans of water, one with warm water about 98 degrees, and the other with cool water, 68 degrees. You put your hand in the cool water, for one minute, and then the warm water for one minute. You alternate for about ten to fifteen minutes. This helps the circulation and brings down some of the swelling. There are also light compression garments that you can use to help with the swelling. There’s elevation. If your hand starts to swell, you just elevate it above your heart for a minute, try to close and open the hand, several times, and that should bring some of the blood back into your system.

**Dr. Hendler:** Let me ask you about the contrast baths. You gave the degrees but when you turn your hot water on and just let the hot water run, you know, just in your house without using a pot to boil it, how many degrees is that?

**Cathy:** Well, everyone has their water set at different temperatures. You don’t want it to hot that it turns your hand beet red. You want it just on the side of warm. Body temperature is 98 degrees. When I say around 98 degrees, I am saying you should feel it slightly warm but not hot.

**Dr. Hendler:** So this is something that you just do with your spigot. You definitely put it in the microwave or anything.

**Cathy:** No, not at all.
Dr. Hendler: You said 68 degrees. What is cold water when it comes out of your house? It’s probably the same as the temperature outside?

Cathy: Yes, it’s probably about 68 to 70 degrees. You can just turn it to cold tap water. Some people are a little less tolerant of cold so they make it cool instead, a little bit warmer than the cold.

Dr. Hendler: The next question is, is there anything I can do for the pain?

Cathy: Yes, there are several things that help with pain from a wrist fracture. This is one of the more painful breaks in the body and when you are doing the contrast baths, if you put a handful of Epsom salts, in the warm water, that seems to soothe some of the pain. Also the Tubigrip or the light compression garment that you put on also is helpful in reducing pain. When you are out and about, you might want to put on a splint for protection so that friends don’t come up and grab your hand, not knowing that you just fractured it. So a splint for protection, and if you tend to stumble and fall again, that would also be a good idea as well. If your doctor says it’s okay, you can take some nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs such as perhaps Motrin or some aspirin. Moist heat is always helpful before you start moving your wrist around so you can take a towel and put some hot water on it and wrap the hand with the towel so that your hand gets some moist heat penetrating into the skin. The moist heat does seem to help with the pain. You always want to keep things moving as well.

Dr. Hendler: So when you add the Epsom salts to the contrast bath, that helps with pain?

Cathy: Yes. It’s one of those old wives tales that for some reason, it really does work with this type of pain. So, you can give it a try. If it doesn’t help, you don’t need to feel obligated to use it. But a lot of folks find that the Epsom salts in warm water does soothe a lot of that real intense burning pain that people get with this type of fracture.

Dr. Hendler: Okay, when can I start using my wrist for full activities?

Cathy: Okay. The doctor will let you know when you will have clearance for full use, but generally, in therapy, we try to get the motion back before we start strengthening. So once you get your maximum range of motion back from doing the exercises, then gradually you can start with a one pound weight doing exercises in wrist flexion, wrist extension, lifting the weight overhead. You progress one pound each five to seven days until you are up to about five pounds. This seems to be a good strengthening program before you start full activity with your hand and wrist.

Dr. Hendler: Now if people don’t want to go out and buy one pound, two pound, three pound, four pound and five pound dumbbells, are there things around the house? Is there a way about that?
**Cathy:** Yes. Use a one pound can of tomatoes, a wrench from the garage, a hammer, anything that weighs approximately a pound, two pounds, three pounds, four pounds and five pounds.

**Dr. Hendler:** Okay. And then I guess some hammers weigh at least five pounds.

**Cathy:** Yes, those mallets are real heavy. They will give you good resistance.

**Dr. Hendler:** Now, how do I get the wrist to move more?

**Cathy:** Okay, this is a little tricky. What you have to do is warm it up real nicely. After a hot bath, a hot shower, after using that hot towel around your wrist, you get it nice and loose, and then you put the injured wrist, the hand, on the edge of the table. Then you take your unaffected hand and rest it on top of your broken wrist hand, and you lift the broken wrist elbow up in the air, keeping the hand that was injured flat on the table. You raise the elbow up for a full 60 seconds. Stretchy pain is okay. No sharp shooting pains but a little stretchy pain is fine.

After you’ve held your elbow up for one minute, then you bring your elbow down underneath the table for 60 seconds. After you’ve had it underneath the table for 60 seconds, you push it to the right, and then to the left for 60 seconds. After you’ve done that, this is a five minute exercise. You take your affected wrist, and you try to push the thumb and wrist using your unaffected hand trying to flatten your broken wrist hand, flat, so that it’s palm up on the table. You hold that for 60 seconds.

So this is a good exercise. It’s up to you and it usually is better to let you try to get that range rather than having someone else do it and push a little too far and cause that sharp pain. We just want to stay within the stretchy pain lines. We don’t want to go beyond that.

**Dr. Hendler:** And you do that once a day?

**Cathy:** You can do that four to six times a day. You don’t always have to use the heat before but the heat does loosen it up so that it moves more easily, especially the first time of the day.

**Dr. Hendler:** How about the fingers? How do I get the stiff fingers to move?

**Cathy:** Okay. If the fingers are still stiff, you want to get them in the moist heat as well. So after a hot bath, or after the towel has been around the hand for awhile, you press down so that you’re pulling the fingers into the palm with the opposite hand. You want to keep that pressure for three to five minutes. Then you open up the fingers, and you press your hand flat on the table using your opposite hand to try to stretch out those fingers, again for the three to five minutes. You don’t want to just quickly open and close. You want to train the tissues to actually lengthen. They need a three to five minute
stretch to get those tissues to lengthen and open the fingers, and close them all the way
down.

**Dr. Hendler:** So you’re using your other hand to help yourself make a tighter fist than
regular, you hold that for three to five minutes, and then you flatten your hand against the
table, palm down, and you hold it down with the other hand for three to five minutes.

**Cathy:** Correct.

**Dr. Hendler:** Okay, what if there is a numb feeling in the fingers? What do you do
about that?

**Cathy:** Okay. If there is numbness, you need to notify the doctor immediately. This can
cause – with the swelling in the wrist, there can be compression of the median nerve and
this can cause carpal tunnel. If there is compression of the median nerve, your doctor
needs to know, and they usually do check this very carefully. But sometimes when you
start moving your wrist a little bit, it swells up ever so much and can cause a little more
of this carpal tunnel.

So for that, you do let the doctor know, and the therapist, if you’re seeing a hand
therapist, which probably with all this program sounds like a lot to do. This is meant to
give you an idea of what you can start with at home if you’re unable to see the therapist
right away. But there are lots of programs for the carpal tunnel syndrome that can help
relieve your symptoms.

**Dr. Hendler:** And of course the carpal tunnel causes what we are calling numbness, but
it also is what people call a pins and needles feeling, especially noted in the palm.

**Cathy:** And the first three fingers, yes.

**Dr. Hendler:** Let me ask you then, fracturing a wrist. What are some of the most
common type of people that fracture it, and what did they do that caused it to fracture?

**Cathy:** The most common cause of wrist fracture is what we call a FOOSH, fall on
outstretched hand. That is coming with hard impact onto cement which seems to be the
worst surface to fall onto to cause that fracture to occur in the distal radius.

**Dr. Hendler:** So you’re walking, you trip, you start to go forward, you reflexively put
your hands out, and you fracture your wrist. And that’s how it mostly happens.

**Cathy:** Yes.

**Dr. Hendler:** I think that’s all the questions I have.

**Cathy:** Okay. Well thank you very much.
**Dr. Hendler:**  Thanks for being here.

KPHealthcast is created by the people at Kaiser Permanente in Fremont, Hayward, and Union City, California. These podcasts are for general information only. They’re not intended to be used as a substitute for medical advice given to you by your personal physician. If you or your family member have any of the conditions that we discuss in our podcasts, we encourage you to discuss your individual case with your personal physician. Every case is different and your physician is in the best position to know what’s best for you.

You can find all our podcasts on our home page at [http://www.KPHealthcast.org](http://www.KPHealthcast.org). You can e-mail us at Castmaster@KPHealthcast.org. We’d love to hear from you. Check our home page regularly for new topics and, as usual, be on the lookout for new ways to thrive.