Orthopaedic Connection

Unusual Wrist Fracture

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Transforming patient information into patient understanding.

How many wrist bones are there? O.K. Name them.
Yep. No one raising their hand.
Don’t feel bad because very few doctors could answer those 2 questions. Anatomy education has been down graded in medical school, sadly. Nevertheless there is one of the eight wrist bones that you should keep in mind.
It is called the scaphoid (also sometimes called navicular. Don’t ask why.).

Why is it Important?
The scaphoid is often injured when you fall on your outstretched hand. I refer to it as the unusual fracture because most of us break the ends of the 2 forearm bones when we fall and “break the wrist”.
The scaphoid is important because it can be overlooked as a fracture when the wrist is injured.

“Must Be A Sprain”
Patients very often don’t seek our help at first because it acts different than a fracture of the radius and ulna. Those fractures cause swelling, bruising, pain and often look deformed.
Scaphoid fractures hide and can be hard to diagnose even on plain x-rays. So the injured person passes it off as a sprain, “but it never gets better”. Days, weeks even months pass.

Big Problem
When the diagnosis of a scaphoid fracture is not made shortly after injury and treatment is delayed, scar tissue and changes in the bone cause it not to heal. Doctors call this “non union”. OOPS!
Well it is somewhat more complicated than just delay as the reason the bone doesn’t heal.

Diagnosis
Almost everyone can remember when they fell on the wrist and thought it was a sprain. After a careful exam and plain x-rays the diagnosis may be coming more clear. But it may not.
Frequently though we need to order an MRI or CT study to be sure of what the problem is. Often the scar tissue separation of the fracture can be seen and even worse part of the scaphoid can sort of crumble. At this point if diagnosis has been delayed you don’t just put someone in a cast. That will not help.

Treatment
It is beyond this discussion to discuss treatment in detail at this stage, but it almost always comes down to surgery. Orthopaedic hand surgeons don’t all agree on what type of surgery should be done. It is a very complicated problem.

Best Advice
If you have a wrist injury don’t delay having an Orthopaedic Surgeon evaluate it in a timely way. It is your best chance of having a good result and avoiding a life time of problems.
My patients put their trust in me and what I do improves the quality of their lives.

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