

Argus Orthopaedic Zone

External Fixator - What's That?

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Transforming patient information into patient understanding.

A few of you out there know what I'm talking about. For the rest please don't think this is going to be boring and turn the page. You will learn something important. I promise.

If only I could show you a picture of an external fixator my job would be much easier. Since I can't show a picture, here goes. Since I am something of a wordsmith, it will help.

Fracture

External fixators are a way to treat fractures especially of the wrist. I'll try not to get too clinical, O.K.

Many fractures can't simply be set and placed in a cast. Open surgery doesn't work for lots of fractures either. The something in between is the external fixator. It is a metal mechanical device that is entirely outside the body (external) except for the metal pins that are placed in the bones.

Description

Picture stainless steel "pins" about half the diameter of a pencil. The sharp end of these pins goes into the bone several inches above and below the fracture. They stick out of the skin so a very adjustable metal clamp can be secured to the pins. Typically in a wrist for example 4 pins are used, 2 in the hand and 2 in the forearm. After the fracture is set, the metal clamp is attached to the pins and the joints of the metal clamp can be tightened to hold the fracture in place. The pins are bandaged and a splint is applied to further stabilize the fracture.

Sound Scary?

It might be if I didn't have the anesthesia doctor with me in the operating room. In most cases patients go to sleep for the procedure. It is surgery, but the incisions are small to place the pins in the bone. It takes about an hour or less to do the surgery and get the patient to the recovery room.

Why use it?

Fractures can occur in several pieces especially around the wrist. A cast or open surgery just doesn't work in a lot of these cases. The external fixator can hold the fracture pieces in reasonable position (alignment) for six weeks or so to allow for initial healing. After the fixator is taken off, a further time of splinting or casting could be needed depending on the fracture.

Humpty Dumpty

When he fell off the wall and broke into pieces, I might have been able to put him back together with an external fixator! I have used it on countless fractures over the years and I am very glad we have it to treat these really difficult fractures. It can be used on several other bones besides the wrist, but the wrist is the most frequent.

It is always important to remember that I am trying to make this fracture (wrist for example) turnout the best, given the problem that was brought to us. I try to make it "as good as new", but often that isn't realistic.

Hopefully you will never need an external fixator, but if you do isn't it nice to know it is there?

View of External Fixator

There are pictures of an external fixator on my website that you can go to in order to see it. www.orthopodsurgeon.com in the Library section under fractures. Website open 24 hours, we never close!

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

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

Be well.

Dr. Haverbush