The Role of Occupational Therapy in Treating Wrist Fractures

About 1 of every 6 fractures treated in emergency rooms is a wrist fracture, also known as a Colles’ fracture or distal radius fracture.

Often caused by falls, wrist fractures are common among the elderly, often with underlying issues such as osteoporosis and arthritis.

Nearly 75 percent of hip, spine and distal forearm fractures occur among patients 65 years old or over.¹

What is the role of a Certified Hand Therapist in treating wrist fractures?

After the cast is removed, it’s common for patients to seek treatment from an occupational/hand therapist, who will create a treatment plan to improve function and decrease impairments that often exist after immobilization.

Occupational therapists take a comprehensive approach to treatment, accounting for the patient’s demands of home or workplace, such as caregiver roles or other needs that affect returning to a normal and safe lifestyle.

“Our goal is to help our patients return to their normal daily activities and regain their confidence and strength,” said Kathy Ramaekers, OT-R/L, CHT. “It is also important to educate the patient on techniques to prevent future accidents or injuries, such as falls.”

Research shows it can be beneficial to begin therapy early.

In a retrospective pilot study comparing the number of visits required to regain functional wrist and forearm range of motion in patients who underwent open reduction and internal fixation of the distal radius (Journal of Hand Therapy, 2009), there was a statistically significant difference between one and two months postoperatively.²

The analysis revealed that starting early range-of-motion after surgery enables patients to regain functional wrist and forearm range of motion earlier and with fewer visits required.²

“One of my elderly patients had a wrist fracture and arthritis had set in, causing additional pain and weakness,” Ramaekers said. “He was having trouble caring for his wife, who had Alzheimer’s, so we worked on

What is a Certified Hand Therapist?

A CHT is an occupational therapist or physical therapist who has a minimum of five years of clinical experience, including 4,000 hours or more in direct practice in hand therapy.

In addition, the Certified Hand Therapist has successfully passed a comprehensive test of advanced clinical skills and theory in upper quarter rehabilitation. Because of changes in the profession, every CHT is required to demonstrate continued professional development and competency by recertifying every five years.

How Many CHTs Are There?

There are 5,759 Certified Hand Therapists in the United States.

Source: http://www.htcc.org

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his hand contractures and wrist weakness three times a week, using different modalities, along with dynamic and static splinting.”

Over a few months, the patient regained most of his movement and decreased pain and stiffness substantially, allowing him to be completely independent again and assist with his wife’s care.

“This is very common among our older patients, and these underlying conditions need to be addressed for our patients to achieve maximum recovery,” Ramaekers added.


Kathy Ramaekers, OTR/L, CHT

With more than 20 years’ experience in occupational therapy in both the outpatient and inpatient rehab setting, Kathy has been a Certified Hand Therapist since 2008 and a Certified Lymphedema Specialist since 2005. Kathy received her degree in occupational therapy from Creighton University in 1992.

“Educating our patients to help them feel empowered to make change is of utmost importance in occupational therapy,” said Ramaekers. “I always begin with a comprehensive evaluation of my patients to determine what I can do to help them. I look at the big picture and determine how I can improve their quality of life, not just treat a symptom.”