Broken (fractured) neck of the humerus

Te kakī pūkaka tāwhatiwhati
Your humerus is the bone in your upper arm. The neck of the humerus is near the top of this bone. A break in the neck of the humerus is quite common, especially among older women. It can be caused by falling onto your outstretched hand.

If you break the neck of your humerus without significant force, your doctor may recommend checking if you have osteoporosis. If you meet the criteria, they may send you for a bone density scan.

If you've broken the neck of your humerus, your shoulder and upper arm will be very painful, and you'll have difficulty moving your shoulder.

Treating a broken neck of the humerus
This type of injury is usually treated by putting your arm in a sling or shoulder immobiliser, which keeps it at a right angle. This keeps the bone still.

If you have a very bad fracture, you might need surgery. If you do need surgery, it will be done by an orthopaedic surgeon who will explain the surgery to you beforehand.

You should wear the sling under your clothes for one to two weeks as this acts like a splint and helps to keep your arm still. As your shoulder becomes less painful, wear the sling on the outside of your clothes.

At first, it might be more comfortable to sleep sitting up, as this helps to keep the broken bone lined up correctly and stops you from rolling on it. It's important to exercise your wrist and elbow out of the sling at least twice a day. This stops them getting stiff.

You'll probably have quite a lot of bruising, all the way down to your hand. This is from bleeding from the broken bone and is normal. Make sure you remove any rings from your fingers before they start to swell.

Self-care for a broken neck of the humerus
The best pain relief is paracetamol (Panadol). Take two tablets every four hours, but no more than eight tablets a day. Avoid anti-inflammatories like ibuprofen, as they may slow down how quickly your bones heal.

Exercises
These exercises are a guide for the first phase of your rehabilitation. They might be a bit uncomfortable but shouldn't be painful. Your physiotherapist might give you other exercises to do as well.
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Hand
Clench and release your fist 10 times an hour to reduce the swelling.

Elbow flexion and extension
1) Take your arm out of the sling.
2) Slowly bend and straighten your elbow as much as possible. Do this 10 times.
3) Repeat this four to five times a day.

Pendular exercise
1) Stand beside a table, bench or something similar, and lean on your unaffected arm, bending forward slightly at the hips.
2) Let your affected arm hang down, with your elbow straight.
3) Swing your arm gently forward and backwards (like a clock's pendulum). Do this 10 times.
4) Swing your arm in circles, like stirring a pot. Do this 10 times in both directions.
5) Repeat this four to five times a day.

Getting help for a broken neck of the humerus
If the pain relief doesn't help or you have any other concerns, see your general practice team. You can see a physiotherapist who can help you with exercises and help you strengthen your arm.

ACC may be able to provide help while you aren't fit for work, such as home help or taxis to appointment as well as work compensation payments.

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