

Fibula Fractures

The fibula runs parallel to the tibia on the outside of the lower leg, but is smaller. The fibula usually fractures at the same time as the tibia. When only the fibula fractures, it is usually because of a direct blow to the side of the leg or an extreme sideways bend at the ankle or knee.

When only a fibula fractures, it usually does not cause long-term complications.

Rarely, when the segments of broken bone are separated significantly by the injury, one of the nerves to the foot may be injured, causing foot drop, a condition in which the foot hangs limp at the ankle and drags on the ground during walking.

Symptoms

A fibula fracture that occurs alone usually causes:

- Localized swelling and tenderness at the fracture site, along the outside of the lower leg
- Pain at the outside of the lower leg that becomes worse when you walk

Diagnosis

Your doctor will examine your injured leg, checking for swelling, deformity, abrasions, bruising and tenderness. To help determine whether a sharp edge of broken bone has damaged your leg's blood vessels or nerves, the doctor also will feel the pulses along the length of your injured leg, will assess how you respond to touch and will check for normal muscle strength in your leg and foot. If the physical examination suggests that your leg's arteries or large veins may have been injured, the doctor will order specialized tests called Doppler studies to measure the leg's blood flow more precisely.

Your leg will be X-rayed to confirm the location and severity of your fracture, and to check for less-obvious fractures and dislocations in nearby joints.

Expected Duration

A leg fracture can take many months to heal. Six months is a reasonable estimate of average healing time, although some fractures take longer.

Treatment

In general, a fibula fracture that occurs without a tibia fracture can be treated without hospitalization. Your doctor probably will tell you to rest the injured leg, apply ice to the injured area, and take a nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drug (NSAID), such as ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin and others), to ease pain and relieve swelling. If bearing weight on your injured leg is very painful or if the fracture is near the ankle, your doctor may apply a cast and recommend that you use crutches temporarily.

If your fracture breaks the skin, you also will be given antibiotics intravenously (into a vein) to prevent infection. If you have not had a tetanus shot within the past 10 years, a tetanus vaccination will be recommended.

Once your fracture has healed enough, your doctor will prescribe a program of physical therapy to restore full strength and function in your injured leg.

Prognosis

Almost all fractures of the fibula shaft heal very well with no complications.

Source: Aetna IntelliHealth, featuring Harvard Medical School's Consumer Health Information, www.intelihealth.com/IH/ihtIH/WSIHW000/9339/31206.html