

## *Orthopaedic Connection*

### **Broken Collarbone**

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#### *Transforming patient information into patient understanding.*

A broken collarbone is the common term for what doctors refer to as a fractured clavicle. It is such a common injury that most people pay very little attention to it, but they don't know much about it beyond the term.

When we finish you will know way more than you did before and maybe more than you wanted to know! But you will never think about the humble collarbone in the same way again.

#### **Interesting (I think!) Facts**

- The collarbone isn't straight, but is a gentle S curve.
- Many babies are born with a broken collarbone from passage through the birth canal.
- The collarbone is like a strut that connects the arm to the body.
- Collarbones do not become completely hardened and formed until about the age of 20.
- Athletes break their collarbone by falling on the elbow and the force is transmitted upward to the shoulder.
- There are a whole bunch of major vessels and nerves right under the collarbone, which pass to the arm and hand.

#### **Signs of a break**

As a reminder fracture and break are words that mean the same thing and are used interchangeably.

- The shoulder sags down and forward.
- Can't lift the arm due to pain
- A grinding sensation if you try to raise the arm.
- A deformity or bump over the fracture site.
- Skin over the bone may be pushed up into a "tent" formation.

#### **Diagnosis**

Although a broken collarbone is usually obvious I will always take some shoulder x-rays to pinpoint the severity and location of the break. Most fractures are in the middle third of the bone.

#### **Treatment**

Most broken collarbones heal with conservative treatment. This however depends on many factors.

#### **Age**

I mentioned in the beginning that fractures of the collarbone in babies during birth are fairly common. I think it bothers the mother (and grandmother!) more than the baby. The doctor who delivered the baby may call me to see the baby in the nursery to reassure the parents that the injury is common and it is guaranteed to heal in about 2 – 3 weeks. No treatment is necessary other than care in handling the baby's shoulder so as not to cause pressure for a few weeks. No residual problems ever occur. This however is totally a different problem than birth injury to nerves in the neck and shoulder.

Children under 10 – 12 almost always can be managed in some type of an immobilizer to stabilize the fracture ends. It takes 4 – 6 weeks in most cases to heal enough to be out of immobilization.

### **Fracture Pattern**

In many fractures of the collarbone the ends are at least touching which is perfectly OK for conservative treatment. Sometimes there are a few pieces of bone in the fracture, but that is still OK for natural healing.

At times I take an x-ray and find that the bone ends are widely separated. Gulp! The patient will often ask if I can “set” or reduce the fracture. I could but it won’t ever stay put and it reverts to the greatly separated appearance. There are unfortunately limits to how much of a gap the body’s healing is able to bridge.

### **Surgery**

If the gap between bone ends is too great I recommend surgery to apply a metal plate and screws to bring the fracture back together and hold it for healing to occur. There are some other ways to surgically repair a broken collarbone, but a plate and screws is the most common technique.

It is pretty big open surgery that I might need to do on a shoulder. I only do it if there is no other way. Healing can take several months, but if you are an NFL quarterback like Tony Romo or Aaron Rodgers you will be playing sooner if it is your non throwing shoulder!!

**Personal note:** I broke my collarbone at age 5 which is my only fracture (so far).

See you next week.

*My patients put their trust in me and what I do improves the quality of their lives.*

### **Gratiot County Herald Archive and Office Website**

I hope what you have read has raised questions. No problem!

Please log onto [www.orthopodsurgeon.com](http://www.orthopodsurgeon.com). It has a huge amount of musculoskeletal information in the Website and the Archive of all previous GCH articles.

Check it out and be amazed what you can learn.

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

Dr. Haverbush