POST-OPERATIVE PROTOCOL

Distal Biceps Repair

Reattaching the biceps tendon at the elbow

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This sheet takes you through your recovery, phase by phase, after an operation to reattach the biceps tendon at the elbow. The repaired tendon needs time to heal before it can take any strain, so the early weeks are about protecting it while keeping everything else moving.

PLASTER	BRACE OR SLING	EXERCISES	STRENGTHENING
About 2 weeks	Until about 6 weeks	3 times a day	From 8–12 weeks

Your operation

The biceps is the muscle at the front of the upper arm. It bends the elbow and turns the palm to face upwards. Its tendon at the elbow can tear away from the bone, usually while lifting something heavy. In the operation, the tendon is fixed back onto the bone of the forearm.

The repair takes time to heal. Until it has, a strong pull or a sudden load could tear it again, which is why the early weeks come with limits, and a brace or sling.

Your plaster, then a brace or sling

- For about the first 2 weeks, a plaster splint holds your elbow bent at a right angle. Keep it dry, and keep your fingers moving.
- At your wound check, usually about 2 weeks after the operation, the plaster comes off. Depending on how your tendon was fixed, you then wear either a hinged brace or a sling: Dr Malik will tell you which.
- Straightening the elbow is then allowed step by step, about 30° more every 2 weeks: from about 2 weeks, a third of the way from a right angle towards straight; from about 4 weeks, two thirds of the way; from about 6 weeks, as straight as is comfortable. A hinged brace is set to these limits.
- Wear the brace or sling day and night, taking it off only to wash and to do your exercises, and stop wearing it gradually from about 6 weeks.
- Use your hand for light tasks, such as writing and eating: people who use the hand early tend to have less pain and better movement later.

Things to avoid

- Turning your palm to face downwards, for the first 4 weeks. Rest and exercise with your thumb pointing up.
- Lifting or carrying anything heavy, and especially lowering a weight so that it pulls the elbow straight (as when putting down a heavy bag), until 8 to 12 weeks, when Dr Malik agrees.

- Exercise bands (stretchy resistance bands) or weights in the early weeks: strengthening comes later, when Dr Malik agrees.

Easing pain and swelling

- Take your painkillers regularly, as prescribed, rather than waiting for the pain to build up. The exercises are much easier when the pain is under control.
- In the first few days, rest the arm on pillows with your hand higher than your elbow, to reduce swelling.
- Once the plaster is off, an ice pack wrapped in a thin towel, for up to 20 minutes at a time, several times a day, eases pain and swelling. Keep the wound dry until it has healed.

Getting back to everyday life

- Driving: ask your doctor before you drive again. When you can depends on your progress, and on feeling confident that you can control the car safely.
- Lifting and carrying: light things only, until Dr Malik says you can build up, usually from 8 to 12 weeks.
- Sport: your return to sport is built up gradually, and planned separately for each person, depending on the sport and what it demands of the arm.

What to expect

Recovery is gradual, and strength keeps returning for several months after the operation, so it is worth keeping up your exercises. How quickly, and how far, varies from person to person.

CONTACT THE CLINIC URGENTLY IF

- You have a fever, or feel unwell.
- The wound becomes red, hot or more swollen, or starts to leak.
- The pain suddenly gets much worse, or your painkillers are not controlling it.
- The plaster feels too tight, or your fingers go numb or turn cold, pale or blue.
- You feel a sudden pop or tearing at the front of the elbow, or suddenly lose strength in bending it.
- You have pain or swelling in your calf.

Clinic: +91 99197 03477. If you are short of breath or have chest pain, go to the nearest emergency department straight away.

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

- Start the finger, hand, wrist and shoulder exercises on the day after your operation, unless you are told otherwise.
- Move slowly and smoothly. Some discomfort is normal, but stop if a movement causes sharp pain, and never force it.
- Keep within the limits for your phase, and keep your thumb pointing up for the first 4 weeks.
- The timings are a guide. Follow these exercises as they are written unless Dr Malik tells you otherwise.
- This sheet does not replace individual advice. If it differs from what you were told in clinic, follow the advice you were given there.

WEEKS 0–4

Phase 1: Protecting the repair

The repair is at its most fragile. For about the first 2 weeks the elbow stays in the plaster, so keep everything around it moving. Once the plaster is off, you can start bending and straightening the elbow gently with help, with your thumb pointing up and within the straightening limit for your stage.

01 Fingers, hand and wrist

Keeping the hand and wrist moving while the elbow is protected.

1. Make a fist, then spread your fingers wide.
2. Touch each fingertip to the tip of your thumb in turn.
3. Bend your wrist up and down, as far as the plaster allows.

REPETITIONS	HOW OFTEN
10 of each	3 times a day

02 Shoulder and posture

Keeping the shoulder and shoulder blade moving freely.

1. Sit or stand up tall. Shrug your shoulders up towards your ears, then let them drop and relax.
2. Draw your shoulders gently forwards, then squeeze your shoulder blades back and down. Hold for 5 seconds, and relax.
3. Keeping the elbow in its plaster, brace or sling, lift the arm forwards and out to the side as far as is comfortable, to keep the shoulder moving.

REPETITIONS	HOW OFTEN
10 of each	3 times a day

03 Bending and straightening the elbow

Starting to move the elbow, with your other hand doing the work.

1. Take the brace or sling off and sit with your forearm resting on a pillow on your lap, thumb pointing up.
2. Use your other hand to bend the elbow gently, as far as is comfortable.
3. Then let it straighten slowly, with your other hand guiding it, but no further than your current limit.
4. Put the brace or sling back on afterwards.

REPETITIONS	HOW OFTEN	START
10	3 times a day	From about 2 weeks

> **MOVING ON** At about 4 weeks you can straighten the elbow a little further. Move on when Dr Malik or your physiotherapist is happy with your progress.

WEEKS 4–8 Phase 2: Gaining movement

Carry on with the Phase 1 exercises, and add these. You can now turn the forearm both ways, gently and with help. From about 6 weeks you can stop wearing the brace or sling gradually, and start moving the elbow on its own. By 6 to 8 weeks, aim to move the elbow as freely and as far as it allows: how far varies from person to person.

04 Turning the forearm

Gently regaining the turn of the forearm, both ways.

1. Sit with your elbow bent at a right angle and tucked into your side, the forearm resting on a pillow, thumb pointing up.
2. Hold your wrist with your other hand.
3. Gently turn the forearm so that the palm faces up, then so that it faces down, only as far as is comfortable.

REPETITIONS	HOW OFTEN	START
10 each way	3 times a day	From about 4 weeks

05 Bending and straightening on its own

Moving the elbow by itself, starting where it takes the least effort.

1. Lie on your back and hold the arm up so that your upper arm points at the ceiling, supported at the elbow by your other hand.
2. Slowly bend and straighten the elbow, watching it as it moves.
3. When that is comfortable, do the same sitting and then standing, with the arm by your side.

REPETITIONS	HOW OFTEN	START
10	3 times a day	From about 6 weeks

06 Using the arm again

Getting the elbow used to everyday tasks, and relearning its sense of position.

1. Use the arm for light daily tasks at a comfortable pace, such as brushing your hair, eating and dressing.
2. Close your eyes, bend your elbow to a comfortable angle, then open them to check where it is. This helps the elbow relearn where it is without looking.

REPETITIONS	HOW OFTEN	START
10	3 times a day	From about 6 weeks

> **MOVING ON** Strengthening starts from about 8 to 12 weeks, when Dr Malik is happy with the healing.

FROM 8–12 WEEKS Phase 3: Getting stronger

When Dr Malik agrees, your physiotherapist will start strengthening for bending and straightening the elbow and turning the forearm, and build it up gradually. You can now combine movements, such as straightening the elbow while turning the palm down. Increase your use of the arm gradually, and ease off if it becomes tired or sore.

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