Cast care

A cast is a big, hard bandage that’s usually made of material like fiberglass or plaster. Casts keep bones in place while they heal.

Kids get casts for many reasons. Usually they’re for broken bones, but kids also might get casts to help bones and surrounding tissues grow properly, or to aid healing after a bone surgery.

A cast wraps around the broken area and needs to be removed by a doctor when the bone is healed. Depending on the age of the child and type of break or healing needed, a cast can be on for as little as 4 weeks or as long as 10 weeks.

Because a cast helps your child heal from an injury and prevent infection, it is important to practice proper cast care.

How do I take care of a cast?

1. Keep a fiberglass cast as clean and dry as possible, or it will get soft or crack. If the cast cracks or loses its shape, call your child’s doctor.

2. Use a damp cloth to clean the cast if it gets dirty. Keep the clean area uncovered until it dries.

3. Don’t allow friends and family to use paint on the cast. They can write on it with markers instead.

How do I care for my child’s skin?

To protect your child’s skin:

- Elevate your child’s cast for the first 24 hours. Put ice bags on the sides or on top of the cast, with a cloth between the cast and the ice bag. This also helps to prevent swelling.

- Soften rough edges by taping 1-inch strips of adhesive tape or moleskin after the cast is completely dry. Then trim the tape corners so the edges don’t roll (see the illustration). Tape the cast as soon as possible to prevent skin damage.

- Change your child’s position often so they don’t have constant pressure on one skin area. If your child has a leg cast, put pillows under their calf to prevent pressure sores and give them support.

- Check your child’s skin for red or swollen areas or sores. Change your child’s position to remove the pressure if there are any red areas. If the area stays red for 30 minutes after removing pressure, call your child’s doctor.

- Don’t let your child stick any object under the cast. This can injure the skin or shift the padding inside the cast.

- Pay attention to bad odors inside the cast. This may mean your child’s skin is infected. If you think this is the case, call your child’s doctor.

- Use only your fingertips to reach into the cast if your child is itchy. Rub the skin gently. If itching continues, use a hair dryer, set on cool, to blow air into the cast.

- Don’t use lotion or powder at the edges of the cast. It can build up or irritate the skin.
How do I protect my child while they’re wearing the cast?

• Give your child sponge baths instead of tub baths or showers. Wash all the skin not covered by the cast. To prevent the cast from getting wet, wrap the cast in plastic wrap and towels.

• Make sure your child uses their sling (if they have one) whenever walking around to protect the cast.

• Before your child eats, have them wear a large smock or shirt to keep food and crumbs from falling into the cast.

• Use crib safety rails for babies wearing casts. A small child may lose their balance and fall with the extra weight of the cast.

What should my child eat while wearing a cast?

Your child should eat fresh fruits, vegetables, and whole-grain breads while wearing the cast to prevent constipation and urinary tract infections. They should also drink plenty of water to stay hydrated.

When should I call the doctor?

Call your child’s doctor if your child’s cast is too tight, which may cause:

• Numbness, tingling, or burning inside the cast
• Bluish or pale skin color
• Skin that’s cold to the touch
• Swelling that doesn’t go away when you elevate the cast
• Severe pain that doesn’t go away with medicine

You should also call your child’s doctor if the cast is too loose, because it won’t help the broken bone to heal.

How will the doctor take off the cast?

To remove your child’s cast, the doctor will use a cast cutter that looks like a small rotary saw. It will not cut the skin, but it is noisy and has lots of vibrations. After the cast is off, gently rub your child’s skin with soapy water. Then rinse and dry it. You might need to apply some lotion.

The casted body part will feel weak, flabby and look thinner. It will return to normal once your child begins using it again and exercising.

What can my child do while wearing a cast?

While your child may not be able to play sports or be active, they can do many other things, including:

• Taking a walk outside or riding in a wagon or stroller
• Listening to music or audiobooks
• Reading books or magazines
• Visiting with friends
• Playing with toys or putting puzzles together (avoid small toys that could fall into the cast)

Your child’s doctor will tell you more about specific activities your child can do.