WHAT IS A SKULL FRACTURE?

This is when one of the skull bones breaks. To get a fracture you usually require a heavy blow to the head and the commonest reason is a car accident or a fall. Hitting the head with or onto a blunt object can cause a local fracture and this does not need to be a heavy blow.

TYPES OF SKULL FRACTURE

LINEAR FRACTURE
Like a crack in a piece of china.

DEPRESSED FRACTURE
When the bone fragments are pushed into the head.

COMPOUND FRACTURE
When the skin over the fracture is cut (lacerated) down to the bone.

DEPRESSED AND COMPOUND FRACTURE
Combination of above fractures.

BASE OF SKULL FRACTURE
Fracture of the bones at the bottom of the skull. These may involve the ear bones or the bones around the air sacs (sinuses) of the nose. These fractures can cause a leak of the fluid from the brain. There is a risk of meningitis with these types of fractures.

WHAT PROBLEMS CAN BE CAUSED BY THE FRACTURE?

This depends on the type of fracture.

The linear fractures cause few problems unless they extend into a sinus or to the base of skull. Sometimes they can damage a blood vessel and produce a blood clot over the surface of the brain. These can be life threatening.

The depressed fractures cause problems because they can damage the underlying brain. If this has happened even with repair of the fracture with an operation the brain may not recover. This is because the bone has usually penetrated deep inside the brain at the time of the injury. These fractures also have the tendency to cause seizures because of the damaged brain.

In compound fractures the skin is open and bacteria can get into the brain and around the broken bits of bone. This can cause infection in the brain or its fluid. The bone can also get infected and need to be removed. This is then replaced with plastic or another substance.

The base of skull fractures can produce no problems or severe problems depending on location. If they involve the sinuses then they can allow the fluid that bathes the brain to leak out and the bacteria to get in and produce meningitis. If the bone involved is near the ear, not only can the above occur but, there can also be problems with hearing or facial movements. Sometimes the side of the face may stop working completely. This may recover over time.
WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU GO HOME?

WHAT YOU SHOULD EXPECT AFTER A SKULL FRACTURE

Headaches
These usually improve after a few weeks. If they are getting worse you should contact your doctor.

Tiredness
This is more from the injury than the fracture itself.

Poor concentration
This again is from the head injury that went with the fracture.

WHAT TO WATCH FOR

WHEN DO YOU NEED SURGERY?
If you have a depressed fracture greater than the thickness of the skull then this should be repaired.

If your fracture has brain fluid leaking through then this should be fixed.

If the scalp is cut and the bone is loose underneath then this should be cleaned and repaired in theatre.

With fractures through the bone of the ear if the fluid is leaking it usually stops in about 2-5 days so this may be watched rather than repaired.

If the fracture involves the front of the brain and the air spaces there we find that there is a high risk of infection and so we usually explore these to find and repair any leak.

SEE SURGICAL LEAFLETS FOR OPERATION DETAILS

WHAT TO WATCH FOR

The complications of epileptic seizures and meningitis do not always present while you are in hospital and can occur much later.

If you have a seizure it is important to have some-one place you in a safe position and to call an ambulance.

If you develop increasing headaches it is important to contact your doctor. If you find clear fluid leaking from your nose it is important to present to your hospital's emergency department.

If you start to become generally unwell, develop a fever or stiffness in the neck or are unable to tolerate bright lights you should have some-one bring you to hospital.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU GO HOME?

DRIVING
Not until you are reviewed and instructed that you can do so by your doctor.

WORK
You will be instructed by your doctor but usually you will need at least 2 weeks off work even if you have not had surgery. It is common not to return to work for 6 weeks following the fracture.

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