

PHYSICAL THERAPY PROTOCOL

Distal Humerus Fracture — Open Reduction & Internal Fixation

ORIF of the distal humerus — early motion with stable fixation

Rigid internal fixation is intended to allow early protected elbow motion, which is critical because the elbow is prone to stiffness. Motion is emphasized first; strengthening and end-range stretching wait until radiographic healing is confirmed.

General Precautions

- Posterior splint initially; motion progressed per fixation stability.
- No lifting, pushing, or bearing weight through the arm until union is confirmed (typically ~6-12 weeks).
- No resisted elbow exercise early.

Phase I — Early Protected Motion Weeks 0-2

Goals

- Control pain and swelling
- Begin protected motion to prevent stiffness

Precautions / Restrictions

- Active-assisted motion only, within surgeon-directed limits
- No weight bearing or resisted motion

Exercises & Interventions

- Active-assisted elbow flexion/extension and forearm pronation/supination as directed
- Active shoulder, wrist, and hand motion
- Edema control / elevation
- Cryotherapy

Criteria to Advance

- Wound healing
- Motion improving within allowed range

Phase II — Active Motion Weeks 2-6

Goals

- Restore full active elbow and forearm motion

Precautions / Restrictions

- No resisted strengthening
- No lifting

Exercises & Interventions

- Active elbow flexion/extension and pronation/supination
- Progress toward full motion
- Scar management
- Continue adjacent-joint motion

Criteria to Advance

- Improving active motion
- Radiographs showing progressing healing

Phase III — Strengthening Weeks 6-12

Goals

- Restore strength once healing is confirmed
- Address any residual stiffness

Precautions / Restrictions

- Begin strengthening only after surgeon confirms adequate healing

Exercises & Interventions

- Progressive resistive elbow/forearm/grip strengthening
- Gentle terminal-range stretching for stiffness
- Endurance work

Criteria to Advance

- Radiographic union
- Strength improving

Phase IV — Return to Activity Months 3-6

Goals

- Return to full function

Exercises & Interventions

- Progressive strengthening
- Sport-/job-specific tasks

Criteria to Advance

- Functional motion and strength
- Surgeon clearance for full loading

This protocol is a general guideline. Progression is criteria-based and may be advanced or slowed by Dr. O'Donnell based on intraoperative findings, tissue quality, fixation, and individual healing. Time frames are approximate. Direct questions to the office at (305) 393-8810.