

Cleft Care: Following jaw distraction

What is a jaw distraction?

Jaw distraction (mandibular distraction osteogenesis) is an operation used to lengthen a small or recessed lower jaw. A small jaw can cause the tongue to fall back and block the airway. This can make breathing difficult, especially during sleep.

This surgery slowly moves the jaw forward, which helps to:

- open the airway
- improve breathing
- support feeding and growth.

How does the distraction work?

Small devices (distractors) are placed into the jaw during surgery.

- turning usually begins the day after surgery
- you will be shown how to safely turn the device
- the jaw is slowly lengthened as new bone forms
- the distractors are usually turned 1 to 2 times per day.

It is important to follow the turning schedule carefully, as this can affect healing.

You will be shown how to turn the distractors before going home. If you are unsure or having difficulty, contact your team for advice.

Recovery

The distractors stay in place for about 6 to 8 weeks while the bone strengthens. During this time:

- your child can usually be at home
- breathing and feeding should improve.

Your child should:

- stay home from school for 2 weeks.
- avoid sports for 6 to 8 weeks.



Distractor care

Keeping the distractor sites clean helps prevent infection:

- clean the sites twice a day as shown before discharge
- take care around the distractor arms.

It is common to see some swelling around the distractor sites. The distractor arms will be visible. Turning the device may feel unusual but should not cause significant pain.

Pain relief

If your child is in pain, you can give paracetamol as directed on the packaging.

Signs of infections

Please watch for:

- temperature over 38°C
- increasing swelling or redness around the distractor sites
- bleeding or increased fluid (ooze) from the sites
- a strong or unusual smell
- increased pain or distress
- device concerns (e.g. loosening, difficulty turning).

If you notice any of these, contact the cleft nurse on 08 6456 4380 or PCH.PlasticsCNS@health.wa.gov.au during office hours. If your child is unwell or you are concerned, see your GP or go to your nearest emergency department.

Follow-up

You will receive an appointment a week after discharge for review in the Plastics Dressing Clinic (PDC). You will also receive an appointment to see the surgeon at around 3 months after surgery.

If you have any questions or concerns, contact Plastics Administration during office hours on 08 6456 4380 and your call will be directed to the appropriate person to assist you.



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