

Pope breezes through first health scare: a broken wrist

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AOSTA, Italy — Pope Benedict XVI, 82, survived his first health scare as pontiff on Friday, breezing through an operation for a broken wrist after suffering a fall while on holiday in northern Italy.

"Everything went well" in the operation carried out with local anaesthetic in a hospital in Aosta, in the far northwest of Italy, said regional government president Augusto Rollandin.

The head of the Roman Catholic Church since April 2005 was a "friendly and excellent" patient, surgeon Manuel Mancini told reporters, describing the operation to insert two metal pins into the broken bone as "routine."

The German-born pope returned to his chalet in the hamlet of Les Combes d'Introd where he began a two-week holiday on Monday.

The pope had slipped and fallen in his bedroom during the night, a Vatican statement said.

After spending more than six hours at the hospital, Benedict emerged smiling, waving to well-wishers with his left arm as his right arm was in a cast.

Photographers on the scene noted that he had placed the so-called Fisherman's Ring -- part of his official regalia, symbolising the work of the Apostle Peter, the first pope -- on his left ring finger.

The gold ring, which features a bas relief of Peter fishing, has been used to seal papal documents since the mid-19th century.

Benedict's personal physician, cardiologist Patrizio Polisca, said routine tests found that the pontiff's "general (health) conditions are good," in a communique published by the Vatican.

The pope was scheduled to recite the weekly Angelus prayer in Romano Canavese, in the neighbouring Piedmont region, on Sunday.

Vatican spokesman Federico Lombardi said the event was "neither confirmed nor cancelled pending the doctors' advice."

Benedict, who is right-handed and an avid pianist in his leisure time, had had a piano sent to the chalet, media reports said.

Soon after the pope was spotted entering the hospital accompanied by his personal secretary Monsignor Georg Gaenswein early Friday, Lombardi told AFP there was "no cause for concern."

Hospital director Pierluigi Berti said the pontiff's fall was not the result of any illness.

The Vatican communique said an X-ray had determined that the pope had a "slight fracture" of the wrist. Benedict celebrated mass as usual and had breakfast before going to hospital, the Vatican said.

Benedict has had no notable health problems since his election following the death of John Paul II, whose final years were marked by noticeable pain and suffering from Parkinson's disease.

Four years before he became pope however, the then cardinal Joseph Ratzinger spent nearly a month in hospital following a brain haemorrhage, according to the German daily Bild. It said he has suffered from fainting spells.

And in 1992, he received stitches for a head wound he suffered in a fall while in holiday in Bressanone, northern Italy. He stayed in hospital for several days under observation.

The pope's older brother Georg Ratzinger revealed that he was "very frightened" when Benedict was elected because of his age -- 78 at the time.

"I'm very frightened. I thought that his advanced age and his health, which is not so stable, would be reason enough for the cardinals to look for someone else," Georg Ratzinger, now 85, told German television.

In another interview he told the German Catholic news agency KNA that his brother was not in "very robust health... nor is his heart especially strong."

The Holy See does not issue regular bulletins on the pope's state of health.

Journalists have observed signs of fatigue in the pontiff following some of his overseas trips.

When he travelled to Australia last year, Benedict took several days off in the country before beginning his official appearances at World Youth Day celebrations in Sydney.

<http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5juqGUoi9fSqlX6NI3SGfp1y0k0aw>