

Get Rid of Elbow Pain

Get your swing and strength back today!
by Manvir Purewal M.Sc PT



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CHAPTER ONE

DEFINITION OF ELBOW PAIN

The elbow is a joint of three arm bones that muscles and tendons use to pull, push and rotate the forearm.

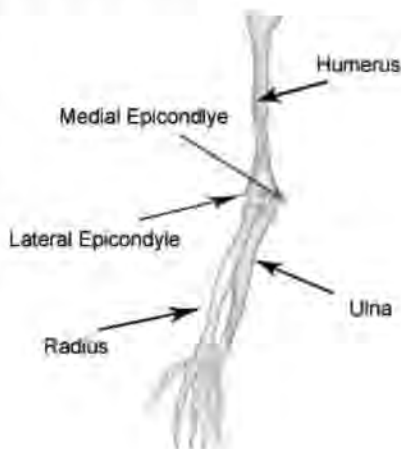
Strain or injury to either the muscles, tendons that attach the muscles, or the bones themselves can result in pain felt at the elbow. In addition, if any of the ligaments, nerve networks servicing the elbow joint or any arteries or veins suffer damage. Pain at the joint can result.

Even wrist, shoulder, forearm or upper arm problems can in certain circumstances cause pain at the elbow.

Elbow pain is not serious very often, but since we use our elbows in many essential and complex ways, any pain in that joint can considerably affect our lives, even to the extent of limiting essential activities.

THE ELBOW DESIGN AND ITS FUNCTIONS

The elbow is a complex joint of the three major bones in the arm. The upper arm bone, known as the humerus, joins with the two bones of the forearm, known as the ulna, inner or under arm, and the radius, outer or upper arm. This joint acts as a hinge, moving the arm up and down (flexing and extending).



The radius and ulna also rotate at the elbow and rotate independently or together with the hinge effect with the humerus and this necessitates a complex muscle function. The well-known biceps muscle flexes, or raises, the hinge at the elbow. The triceps muscle extends or lowers the hinge. The humerus has a bony prominence, known as the lateral epicondyle, and tendons are attached here, and these can be injured, resulting in inflammation, called tendinitis. This is popularly known as "tennis elbow". The bony prominence at the inner or lower part of the elbow, known as the medial epicondyle, have has muscles attached by means of tendons and if these tendons are injured, medial epicondylitis, popularly known as "golfer's elbow", can result.

Covering the elbow joint is a sac containing fluid, called a bursa that protects the bones and joint by reducing friction. Inflammation of this bursa, together with irritation of the nerves, or inflammation of the tendons, can all cause pain.

CHAPTER TWO

WHAT INJURIES CAN CAUSE ELBOW PAIN?

There are several injuries that can result from overuse, or overloading of the wrists/ elbows, or due to improper positioning. Below is a list of the most common injuries along with some commonly suggested treatments for them.

✔ **Lateral epicondylitis (popularly known as “tennis elbow”)**

This can occur when there is any repetitive movement of the forearm with a twisting motion that can result, especially if repeated frequently and heavily, in damage to the tendons attaching muscles to the outer bony prominence of the elbow, the lateral epicondyle, mentioned above. Some of the most common occupations with actions increasing risk for lateral epicondylitis include:

- ✔ Manual workers using manual screwdrivers,
- ✔ Window cleaners washing windows, or
- ✔ Tennis players hitting backhands, hence the term, “tennis elbow”.



The source of the pain with tennis elbow is mostly due to inflammation of the tendons. It is typically felt as pain at the outside of elbows. Sometimes swelling accompanies, but that spot is usually tenderness. The actual joint at the elbow is not affected so the elbow is still completely useable, maintaining its full range of movement, but the pain might not be fully felt until the end of the day. If the sufferer repeats the twisting movements the pain will usually increase. X-rays of the joint typically show no problems but sometimes show calcium deposits in the tendons or even other unexpected abnormalities of the joint.

Treatment of tennis elbow includes rest, ice packs and anti-inflammatory medications such as aspirin and other non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), such as ibuprofen. Sometimes wearing a brace helps. These braces are typically found at the local drug store. If you are not sure where to find one, ask your physical therapist. Avoid straining the elbow further; and only return to activity gradually once you start to feel better. After any activity, be sure to apply ice to prevent or reduce repeated inflammation. Sometimes supportive straps can prevent repeated injury. In severe cases, orthopedic surgical intervention may be necessary.

🟢 **Medial epicondylitis (golfer's elbow)**

Medial epicondylitis, also known as "golfer's elbow" is inflammation of tendons where they attach to the bony prominence at the inner elbow. These tendons can be strained with improper form of a golf swing. Other activities involving the same motion may also have the same effect. Golfer's elbow is characterized by pain and tenderness at the inside (or under) part of the elbow. Range of motion here is typically not limited because the joint itself is not affected. Any straining or twisting of the forearm with any activity can cause pain and make the condition worse.



**Area of pain
in medial
epicondylitis**

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An X-ray would show a normal joint but calcification at the tendons might be seen especially if tendinitis has lasted for long periods repeatedly. Usual treatments are ice packs, resting of the elbow, medications such as aspirin, ibuprofen or naproxen. Severe inflammation may call for the orthopedic doctor to inject a local corticosteroid into the elbow. After gradually progressing with rehabilitation exercises (prescribed by your physical therapist), and even gradual return to work, your best bet is to apply ice afterwards. This will help to avoid a repeat of the inflammation.

✔ Olecranon bursitis

Olecranon bursitis, (inflammation of the bursa at the tip of the elbow), can result from an injury or minor trauma caused by a disease such as rheumatoid arthritis, gout, or it might be due to an infection. It is usually shown by swelling over the tip of the elbow. The range of movement of the inner elbow joint is not affected.



✔ Fractures

The bones of the elbow can break (fracture) in the elbow joint itself or in the bones next to it. Fractures usually require immobilization and casts and can need orthopedic pinning or open joint surgery.

✔ Sprains

Sprains are stretches or tears of the ligaments (connective tissue holding a joint together). More than one ligament can be affected in a sprain. Possible causes include overstretching the elbow or ramming a stiff arm into something. The seriousness of the injury will depend on the amount of damage to the ligament in question. Treatment includes rest, applying ice, possibly immobilization, and pressure or anti-inflammation medications.

CHAPTER THREE

WHAT CAUSES ELBOW PAIN, AND ITS TREATMENT?

✔ Arthritis of the elbow

Arthritis is inflammation of the elbow joint itself. There are many types of arthritis: rheumatoid arthritis, psoriatic arthritis, reactive arthritis or ankylosing spondylitis.

The signs of arthritis include: inflammation of the joint, decreased movement range, warmth, pain or swelling. The decreased range of movement is due to the swelling at the joint.

Treatment of this is usually based on the severity of arthritis. If you or someone you know has arthritis, see your doctor or physical therapist for the best way to treat your arthritis.

✔ Cellulitis

Cellulitis is skin inflammation, related to infection. It is usually a result of scrapes or abrasions of the skin. In these cases, bacteria on the skin's surface can invade the skin's deeper layers. It shows itself as skin inflammation with heat, swelling and redness. The most common bacteria involved are staphylococcus and streptococcus. A mild fever may be associated with the infection. Antibiotics are generally prescribed to treat this condition. Applying heat can help with the healing. Cellulitis can also lead to an olecranon infection, leading to olecranon bursitis (see above).

✔ **Infected elbow joint (septic arthritis)**

Septic arthritis is an uncommon bacterial infection of the elbow joint. People most at risk are those with diabetes or suppressed immune systems. Intravenous drug abusers or those treated with cortisone medications are also at risk. The bacteria most likely causing an infection is staphylococcus and streptococcus. The condition requires treatment with antibiotics, or even surgical drainage might be applicable.

The characteristic signs of the infection are: heat, redness, swelling and pain. The range of movement at the joint will be limited and there will often be fever with sweating and chills.

✔ **Tumors**

Elbow joint tumors are rare. Primary bone cancer is possible. An X-ray will generally detect it. Pain at the joint may or may not be present. Nuclear medicine bone scanning also can help detection.

✔ **Ulnar nerve entrapment**

The ulnar nerve is popularly known as the "funny bone". It runs between the elbow tip and the ulnar or inner elbow bone. In this position, the nerve can be "pinched" by the normal joint structures or by swollen joint structures, due to injury. Pinching is usually described as entrapment. Symptoms include numbness and tingling in the ring and little fingers of the hand. There may be pain on the inner side of the forearm and even sometimes in the entire forearm. Manual dexterity may be affected. Certain positions, like raising the hand, may increase your symptoms. Be sure to take a note of these positions so that you can discuss it with your physiotherapist.

Treatment involves avoiding any trauma or pressure on the elbow and resting the joint. Sometimes ice can be helpful. In severe cases, surgical repositioning may be needed to relocate the ulna nerve, in severe cases, to a place where it will be not compressed by the joint structures surrounding.

In most cases, conservative treatment is usually the first course of action. Your doctor typically diagnosis the cause, and may either refer you to a specialist or directly to a physical therapist. Conservative treatment includes modalities, such as ice, heat, ultrasound, and electrical stimulation. Furthermore, therapeutic exercises are key factors in your rehabilitation process. These include stretching, strengthening, wrist/elbow position modifications or activity modifications to decrease stress to joints

Call our office today to find out how we can help your pain!

CHAPTER FOUR

ELBOW PAIN - A SUMMARY

- ✔ The elbow joint is the area of union of three long bones.
- ✔ Tendinitis can affect the inner or outer elbow.
- ✔ Treatment of tendinitis includes ice, rest, and medication for inflammation.
- ✔ Bacteria can infect the skin of the scraped elbow.
- ✔ The "funny bone" nerve can be irritated at the elbow to cause numbness and tingling of the little and ring fingers.
- ✔ In most cases, conservative treatment is the first step. In severe cases, surgical intervention may be needed.
- ✔ Rehabilitation of the elbow includes modalities and therapeutic exercises (stretching, strengthening) and position/activity modifications.
- ✔ To find out more, ask your physical therapist.

Services we offer at Pure Life Physiotherapy Surrey:

- ✔ JAM Therapy – Joint Active Motion Therapy
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