SYMPTOM

Elbow and arm pain

Elbow and arm pain is discomfort anywhere from the shoulder to the hand.

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE
Aching, sharp, burning, or tender pain with movement

WHERE IT IS FELT
Shoulder, upper arm, elbow, forearm, wrist, or hand

MOST COMMON CAUSES
Muscle strain, tendon irritation, minor injury

WHEN IT IS URGENT
Chest pressure, breathlessness, or a suddenly cold, pale hand

USUALLY LASTS
Days to weeks, based on the injury or condition

SEE A DOCTOR IF
Persistent pain, worsening symptoms, or difficulty using the arm

Overview

Elbow and arm pain can begin in muscles, tendons, joints, bones, nerves, or other soft tissues. It may follow an injury or repeated activity, but it can also appear without an obvious cause.

Pain may stay in one spot or travel along the arm. Problems in the neck or shoulder can cause pain farther down. Less often, arm pain is related to the heart, blood vessels, or an infection.

The location and type of pain can offer clues, but how it began, what makes it worse, and whether other symptoms are present are also important.

What it may feel or look like

Elbow and arm pain may be:

Swelling or bruising may follow an injury. Irritation of the small fluid-filled sac over the elbow, called a bursa, can cause a soft lump.

Pain on the outer elbow may worsen with gripping or lifting. Inner-elbow pain may increase when bending the wrist or throwing. Nerve irritation can cause burning or electric pain that travels into the forearm or fingers.

- Dull, aching, sharp, burning, or throbbing
- Tender when touched
- Worse with lifting, gripping, twisting, or bending
- Present during activity or at rest
- Accompanied by stiffness, weakness, tingling, or numbness

Common causes

A muscle strain can happen after lifting, exercise, sudden movement, or unfamiliar activity. Mild strains usually cause soreness and pain with movement.

Repeated gripping, tool use, racquet sports, or throwing can irritate the tendons connecting muscle to bone. "Tennis elbow" affects tendons on the outer elbow, although anyone can develop it. Similar irritation can occur on the inner elbow.

An impact, fall, or awkward movement may cause bruising or a sprain. Other possible causes include:

Less common causes include infection, inflammatory joint disease, or a blood vessel problem. Arm discomfort can also occur during a heart attack, especially with chest pressure, breathlessness, nausea, sweating, or discomfort in the jaw, back, or shoulder.

- Bursitis: irritation of the cushioning sac over the elbow
- Arthritis: joint inflammation causing pain, stiffness, or swelling
- Nerve pressure: often causing tingling, numbness, or burning
- Pain from the neck or shoulder: pain that travels into the arm
- A fracture or tendon tear: more likely after significant injury or sudden force

When to seek medical care

Call emergency services if arm or elbow pain occurs with:

Seek same-day care after a significant injury if the arm looks deformed, swelling is severe, or you cannot use it normally. Prompt assessment is also needed for spreading redness, warmth, fever, drainage, or a hot and very swollen joint, which can indicate infection.

Book a routine appointment if pain worsens, keeps returning, disrupts sleep or daily activities, or does not start improving with simple care. Seek assessment sooner for persistent

weakness, numbness, tingling, or unexplained swelling.

- Chest pressure or discomfort, shortness of breath, faintness, or a cold sweat
- A hand or arm that suddenly becomes cold, pale, blue, or severely numb
- Heavy bleeding or a bone visible through the skin
- Sudden loss of movement or feeling after an injury

How the cause is found

A healthcare professional will ask when the pain began, whether there was an injury, which movements affect it, and about work, exercise, repeated tasks, neck symptoms, and other health conditions.

They may check tenderness, swelling, bruising, warmth, skin colour, movement, grip, strength, sensation, reflexes, and the wrist pulse.

Tests are not always needed. An X-ray may be used for a suspected fracture, dislocation, or arthritis. Ultrasound or magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) can assess tendons and other soft tissues. Blood tests may be appropriate if infection or inflammatory disease is possible. Chest or heart tests may be needed for symptoms suggesting a heart-related cause.

Treatment and self-care

Treatment depends on the cause and severity. For mild pain after activity or a minor injury, reduce movements that clearly worsen it. Long periods of complete rest can cause stiffness, so gently move the arm within a comfortable range unless told to keep it still.

A wrapped cold pack may help recent pain or swelling. Do not put ice directly on the skin. Heat may ease muscle tightness or longer-lasting stiffness, but avoid it over a newly swollen or hot area.

Non-prescription pain medicines may help. Follow package directions. Ask a pharmacist or healthcare professional before using them if you are pregnant, take other medicines, or have kidney, liver, stomach, bleeding, or heart problems.

Further treatment may include:

Avoid repeatedly testing a painful movement or suddenly returning to heavy lifting. Increase activity gradually as movement and strength improve.

- Activity changes or adjustments to work equipment

- Guided exercises or physiotherapy
- A short-term brace, strap, sling, or splint
- Treatment for arthritis, nerve pressure, or infection
- Specialist assessment for a fracture, major tear, or persistent symptoms

What to expect

Mild soreness and minor strains often improve within days to a few weeks. Tendon problems may take longer and can return if activity is resumed too quickly.

Recovery depends on the affected tissue, injury severity, usual activities, and any underlying joint or nerve condition. Pain that is not improving does not always mean serious damage, but the cause and treatment plan should be reviewed.

Common questions

Can elbow pain come from my neck?

Yes. Irritated neck nerves can send pain into the shoulder, arm, elbow, or hand. Tingling, numbness, or weakness may also occur, and neck movement may change the symptoms.

Should I keep moving my arm?

Gentle movement usually helps mild, uncomplicated pain. Avoid movements that sharply worsen symptoms. After a significant injury, or if the arm looks deformed, support it and seek medical care rather than testing it.

Why does my elbow hurt when I grip something?

Gripping places force through muscles and tendons attached near the elbow. Tendon irritation is one possible cause, although joint or nerve problems can cause similar pain.

Does arm pain always mean a heart problem?

No. Muscle, tendon, and joint causes are much more common. However, new arm discomfort with chest pressure, breathlessness, sweating, nausea, or faintness needs emergency assessment.

Sources

- NHS. Elbow and arm pain
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- American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons. Elbow (Olecranon) Bursitis
- American College of Radiology. ACR Appropriateness Criteria: Acute Elbow and Forearm Pain
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. About Heart Attack Symptoms, Risk, and Recovery