SYMPTOM

Elbow pain

Elbow pain is soreness, aching, or sharp discomfort in or around the elbow joint.

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE
Aching, tenderness, stiffness, or sharp pain with movement

WHERE IT IS FELT
In or around the joint between upper and lower arm

MOST COMMON CAUSES
Tendon overuse, minor strains, pressure on the elbow

WHEN IT IS URGENT
A hot, red, swollen elbow, especially with fever

USUALLY LASTS
Days to weeks, based on the cause and activity

SEE A DOCTOR IF
Pain persists two weeks, worsens, or limits normal use

Overview

Elbow pain is discomfort in or around the joint connecting your upper arm and forearm. It may begin suddenly after an injury or develop gradually with repeated movement.

The elbow contains three bones, cartilage, ligaments, tendons, nerves, and small fluid-filled sacs called bursae. Pain can come from any of these structures or travel from the neck or shoulder.

Where the pain occurs and which movements trigger it may offer clues. However, symptoms alone cannot confirm the cause.

What it may feel or look like

Elbow pain may be dull, burning, sharp, or tender to touch. It can affect the outer or inner side of the elbow or the bony point at the back.

You may also notice:

Pain on the outer side often becomes worse with gripping or lifting. Inner-side pain may be triggered by wrist movement or throwing. Swelling over the point of the elbow may involve the

bursa.

- Pain when gripping, lifting, twisting, or straightening your arm
- Stiffness or reduced movement
- Weakness when holding objects
- Swelling, warmth, or redness
- Clicking, catching, or a feeling that the elbow locks
- Tingling or numbness extending into the hand
- Bruising after a fall, impact, or sudden pull

Common causes

Many cases are related to repeated use or a minor injury.

Less common causes include osteoarthritis, inflammatory arthritis, gout, a trapped or irritated nerve, and pain referred from the neck or shoulder. Loose pieces of bone or cartilage may cause catching or locking.

More urgent causes include a fracture or dislocation after injury and an infection in the joint or bursa. These usually cause noticeable swelling, heat, redness, severe pain, or difficulty moving the elbow.

- Tendon overuse: Tendons connect muscle to bone. Repeated gripping, lifting, tool use, sports, or computer work can irritate them. Outer-side tendon pain is often called tennis elbow. Inner-side pain is sometimes called golfer's elbow.
- Sprains and strains: A sudden stretch, awkward movement, or increased activity can injure ligaments or muscles around the joint.
- Pressure on the elbow: Leaning on a hard surface can irritate the bursa over the elbow tip. This may cause a soft swelling known as olecranon bursitis.

When to seek medical care

Seek emergency help after an injury if the elbow looks badly bent or out of place, a bone is visible, or bleeding will not stop. Emergency care is also needed if the hand becomes cold, pale, blue, very numb, or suddenly weak.

Call emergency services if elbow or arm discomfort occurs with chest pressure, shortness of breath, sweating, faintness, or nausea. These symptoms can sometimes come from the heart

rather than the elbow.

Arrange same-day medical care if:

Book a routine appointment if pain lasts more than about two weeks despite self-care, keeps returning, disturbs sleep, or limits work and daily activities. You should also be assessed if swelling does not settle or the elbow repeatedly locks or gives way.

- The elbow is hot, red, and swollen, particularly with fever
- Severe pain or swelling develops quickly
- You cannot move the elbow after a fall or impact
- A cut, bite, injection, or recent procedure is followed by increasing redness or pain
- New numbness, tingling, or weakness is getting worse

How the cause is found

A healthcare professional will ask when the pain began, where it is located, and which movements make it worse. Mention any injury, repeated activity, fever, swelling, numbness, neck pain, or previous joint problems.

During an examination, they may check movement, strength, tenderness, swelling, circulation, and sensation in your hand.

Tests are not always needed. An X-ray may be used after a significant injury or when bone or joint damage is suspected. Ultrasound or MRI can show tendons, ligaments, bursae, and other soft tissues when the diagnosis remains unclear. Blood tests or a sample of joint fluid may be needed if infection, gout, or inflammatory arthritis is possible. Nerve tests may be used for persistent tingling or weakness.

Treatment and self-care

Treatment depends on what is causing the pain. For mild pain without a significant injury or urgent symptoms, reduce activities that repeatedly trigger it. Complete rest is not usually needed; gentle movement can help prevent stiffness.

A wrapped cold pack may ease pain and swelling after activity or a minor injury. Do not place ice directly on your skin. Avoid repeatedly leaning on a swollen elbow.

Non-prescription pain medicines may help some people. Follow the package directions and ask a pharmacist or clinician what is suitable if you have other health conditions, take regular

medicines, or are pregnant. Anti-inflammatory medicines are not appropriate for everyone.

Once movement is comfortable, a gradual return to activity is usually better than suddenly resuming heavy lifting or repetitive work. Changing equipment, grip, technique, or workstation position may reduce strain.

Depending on the cause, treatment may include physiotherapy, a brace, prescription medicine, drainage of an infected or very swollen bursa, or treatment for arthritis. Injections have benefits and risks that differ by condition. Surgery is usually reserved for serious injuries or symptoms that do not improve with other care.

What to expect

A minor strain or brief episode of overuse may improve over days to several weeks. Tendon problems often settle more slowly and can return if the same load is increased too quickly.

Recovery after a fracture, dislocation, infection, or nerve problem depends on the injury and treatment. Seek reassessment if symptoms worsen, new swelling or numbness develops, or progress stops.

Common questions

Is tennis elbow always caused by tennis?

No. It describes irritation of tendons on the outer elbow. Work, home projects, lifting, and other sports can produce the same pattern.

Should I keep moving a painful elbow?

Gentle, comfortable movement is often helpful for mild overuse pain. Stop activities that sharply increase pain. Do not force movement after a major injury or if the joint is hot and very swollen.

Can neck problems cause elbow pain?

Yes. An irritated nerve in the neck can cause pain, tingling, numbness, or weakness that travels down the arm. Neck movement may also affect the symptoms.

What is a soft lump over the elbow tip?

It may be a swollen bursa, the small cushioning sac over the bone. Avoid pressure on it and arrange an assessment if it is painful, hot, red, rapidly enlarging, or associated with fever.

Sources

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