

Orthopaedic Connection

Elbow Arthritis? Maybe.

By Thomas J. Haverbush, M.D.
Orthopaedic Surgeon

Transforming patient information into patient understanding.

Nine times out of ten (as the saying goes) when I see someone in the office with elbow pain, they are sure they have arthritis. Fortunately for them, only one time out of ten do they actually have arthritis!

In other words 90% of elbow pain is not from arthritis. It's from some other cause.

Some doctors call anything that hurts around a joint – “arthritis”. It is a very specific diagnosis that can (should) only be made by a good history, careful exam and plain x-rays of the elbow.

Real Arthritis

If I have found that you do have actual arthritis in the elbow, I probably won't tell you to rest it or immobilize it. Almost more than any other joint, the elbow likes to “lock up” and loss of motion is the result. It can be nearly impossible to restore even with physical therapy.

What You Can Do

- Bend and straighten the elbow to stretch it even if there is some pain.
- The other elbow motion is to rotate the forearm. Palm up, twist to move palm down. Use other hand to twist and stretch forearm.
- Avoid impact loads like shoveling.
- Stretching exercise is good.
- Loading work or exercise is bad.
- Use heat then ice for 10 – 15 minutes each if it helps.
- Take Ibuprofen or similar for pain and inflammation.

What I Can Do

I might prescribe physical therapy if I thought that could get you better motion. Sometimes I give a cortisone injection under ultrasound guidance to alleviate pain and help you to increase range of motion.

Joint lubrication injections like I give in the knee are not used in the elbow.

I or the physical therapist may give you a resistance band to work on strength.

What Else?

Well, it is what most of my patients are hoping to avoid. The S word. Surgery for elbow arthritis can help if I think there are things in the elbow blocking movement like loose pieces of cartilage or joint spurs.

In severe cases (fortunately few) a total joint replacement might be suggested. It certainly can relieve pain, but function is limited. Lifting more than 5 – 7 pounds with the replaced elbow is all that is permitted.

There you have an overview of arthritis of the elbow. The best advice if you have it is, don't let it stiffen up.

Gratiot County Herald Archive and Office Website

I sincerely hope all of our loyal readers will take advantage of an endless amount of musculoskeletal information. It is easy! Log onto www.orthopodsurgeon.com.

It gives access to all Website articles, Your Orthopaedic Connection and every GCH article from most recent to the first. Full text! It covers everything I do in the office and hospital.

Good Health. Good life. All the best to you.

Dr. Haverbush