

## *Orthopaedic Connection*

### **Arthritis of the Elbow – Treatment**

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#### *Transforming patient information into patient understanding.*

Last week I tried to present the problem of elbow arthritis. I covered the cause, symptoms and diagnosis of elbow arthritis and this week I would like to conclude with treatment.

#### **Treatment**

To understand treatment of the elbow it is always best to divide it into non surgical or conservative treatment and then the various forms of surgery.

#### **Non Surgical Forms of Treatment**

As you can imagine there are many variations of elbow arthritis and the treatment has to be individualized.

- **Activities.** Arthritis of the elbow may not be caused by overuse, but repetitive overuse can aggravate the arthritis which is there from some other cause. I would no doubt have to suggest modifying work or sports activities to relieve stress on the elbow. That is a primary factor to think about.
- **Medical.** Tylenol of course for pain, Motrin or similar for pain and inflammation relief. While Rheumatoid Arthritis often affects the elbow its treatment with gold salts, immuno-suppressives, etc. is way too complicated to cover here.
- **Physical Therapy.** PT often includes heat first, then cold applications, exercises to increase range of motion and strength. Wearing a protective elbow sleeve helps some.
- **Glucosamine/Chondroitin.** I have not found this to be too effective in treating elbow arthritis.
- **Steroid injections.** While the injection of cortisone medication is not curative it can give significant relief for a very long time in some fortunate patients. It is not difficult to do in the office and worth a try in many patients.
- **Viscosupplementation.** The injection of Hyaluronic acid to treat the pain of arthritis in the elbow is used occasionally, but has not had the same success as in the knee. It might be an option, but it would have to be carefully considered in each patient on an individual basis.

#### **Surgical Options**

If your arthritis does not respond to conservative treatment the dreaded word (for most patients!) surgery may come up. Relax, while I may discuss it, I never try to pressure patients into a treatment that doesn't make sense to them.

The goal of surgery is less pain and increased movement of the elbow if possible. The exact procedure will depend on arthritis type, stage, age and activity requirements.

- **Arthroscopy.** You probably are familiar with arthroscopic surgery for the knee and shoulder. Using somewhat smaller instruments it is possible through 2 or 3 small incisions to remove bone spurs, loose fragments or a part of the bad joint tissue lining. It can be used for Osteo (OA) and Rheumatoid (RA) arthritis.
- **Open Surgery.** If some of the fragments to be removed are large an open operation (arthrotomy) may be required to get the job done.
- **Joint Replacement.** It is a very specialized type of replacement which is obviously a last resort only used if the joint surface is completely worn away. In the properly selected patient pain relief and improved function can be significant. There are several different types of joint replacements available.
- **Horizon.** In patients with loss or change to an area of the elbow joint articular surface, a cartilage/bone graft might be possible. This is an emerging way of treatment that may become more widely available in the future.

I hope this gives you a better, more complete understanding of the treatment of elbow arthritis.

*My patients put their trust in me and what I do improves the quality of their lives.*

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