

Lakeview Community Wellness Center Orthopaedic Connection

Elbow Arthritis

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

Transforming patient information into patient understanding.

What if every time you moved your elbow you had pain? How many times a day do you bend your elbow? Hundreds.

Every time you eat, drink, write, type - pain is always there. You may (or may not) have arthritis of the elbow. For many of my patients this painful situation has taken over and they are worried.

Every pain in the elbow fortunately is not arthritis.

Cause

The cause of arthritis of the elbow is not the same as most of the arthritis I see in other joints.

- Rheumatoid arthritis is the most common type of arthritis in the elbow. RA is a disease of the lining of the elbow joint; the synovial lining. It destroys the bone and soft tissue. It affects both elbows and many other joints as a rule.
- Osteoarthritis affects the elbow far less than the other joints such as the knee and the hip. The cartilage cushion on the ends of the bones becomes rough. The bones begin to rub against each other. Loose pieces appear in the joint.
- Trauma or injury to the elbow can damage the cartilage or joint surface. Think of this the next time you are watching a baseball game! Pitchers pay a very high price for what they do. This eventually leads to the development of post traumatic arthritis.

Signs and Symptoms

- Pain primarily on the outer (lateral) side of the joint that becomes worse as you rotate the forearm.
- Pain that occurs at night or when you are at rest indicates a more advanced stage of arthritis.
- Swelling, which particularly occurs in RA.
- Can't do daily activities because the elbow joint is unstable and gives way.
- Decreased ability to bend or straighten the elbow.

- Catching or locking of the elbow.
- General "feeling" of stiffness.
- Involvement of both elbows or pain also in wrists or shoulders indicates RA.

How I Diagnose Elbow Arthritis

Well, it starts with exam of the elbow for swelling, tenderness and range of movement. But the exam is not limited to the elbow because it should include the shoulder, wrist and hand.

Plain x-rays alone often give me enough information about the joint. These x-rays show arthritis changes as well as loose pieces of bone (bone chips) and calcium in and around the joint. Arthritis changes typically show the joint space to be narrowed and bone spurs may have appeared on the edges of the joint.

It is actually somewhat unusual to need further imaging studies such as MRI.

MRIs are so commonly ordered nowadays that some of my patients are suspicious that they did not have a thorough exam if they didn't get an MRI.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Many doctors will actually order an MRI instead of plain x-rays of the elbow. That is sad because most of the time I don't need the MRI to diagnose elbow arthritis.

More To Come

We have a lot more to cover so this will be a good place to stop for this week. Please come back next week for Part 2 which will include surgical and non surgical treatment. See you then.

Office Website and Lakeview Area News Archive

The office website www.orthopodsurgeon.com is a great source for all the Orthopaedic and Musculoskeletal information you need.

All the Orthopaedic problems I treat are contained in the Website and Your Orthopaedic Connection.

Lakeview Area News Archive of all past articles can be found on the website. The full text of every article!

Check out this tremendous collection of information.

Orthopaedic Clinic

I appreciate your support of the Orthopaedic Clinic I have at Lakeview Community Wellness Center. All of the Orthopaedic problems I treat can be evaluated there.

Coming Clinic dates are October 29, November 5 and November 19, 2010.

Call 989-463-6092 for an appointment at the Clinic or at the office in Alma.

Our goal is simple - To help people return to more pain free, functional lives. I specialize in you.

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

Be well.

Dr. Haverbush