

Argus Orthopaedic Zone

Fractures of the Radial Head. What's That?

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

Transforming patient information into patient understanding.

It doesn't have anything to do with your actual head. Like, it's not a fractured skull, OK?

The radius is the forearm bone on the thumb side and the part of the radius that articulates with the elbow is called – the radial head.

It's Complicated

The radial head is smaller than the end of your thumb at the upper part of the nail. It has everything to say about how your elbow works. Nobody but doctors and nurses even know they have a radial head, but if you injure it, you find out about it in a hurry.

It is round and about a half inch thick. It moves whenever you move your elbow or forearm.

Fractures Come In Threes

Type 1. The radial head is cracked.

Type 2. Somewhat more broken and slightly out of position.

Type 3. Your luck is really bad. It's smashed!

Is It Broken?

Maybe, if you have

- Fallen on your outstretched arm.
- Pain on the outside part of the elbow.
- Swelling in same area.
- Elbow that is black and blue.
- Trouble bending or straightening the elbow.
- Can't rotate the forearm.

What Next?

Hopefully you said, "Doctor, will you examine my elbow and entire arm thoroughly". Right answer!

An x-ray of at least the elbow follows. If the wrist or shoulder is painful, they get x-rayed too.

Bad News

If the x-ray show the radial head is fractured (broken) I will probably place you in a splint which goes above the elbow if it is a type one or even a type two.

Type threes are, in most cases, going to need surgery. What kind varies depending on several things.

Possible surgeries include

- Take out all the broken pieces.
- Repairing the radial head with small pins or screws.
- Replacing the broken radial head with a metal implant.

When you need to have any of these surgeries, it is not likely you will end up with a "normal elbow".

Results

I don't want to leave the impression that the outcome is hopeless. You can have a reasonably comfortable, functional elbow even after surgery. You could lose a little range of motion and weather changes might bother it for a few years.

Best advice is not to break it in the first place!

Gee, after a few minutes you have learned a lot about something you didn't know existed.

Hope you have a good week.

Our goal is quality, highest standards and best outcomes.

Office Website and Argus Orthopaedic Zone Archive

I sincerely appreciate all of you loyal readers and patients present and future and welcome all newcomers!

Besides what you read today there is a huge treasure trove of Orthopaedic and musculoskeletal information at www.orthopodsurgeon.com. It contains the Website Library, Your Orthopaedic Connection and complete archive of every Argus article I have written.

I specialize in you. Be well.

Dr. Haverbush