

Argus Orthopaedic Zone

Pulled Elbow

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

Transforming patient information into patient understanding.

What's that?

It is a funny name for a condition that is not so humorous. It is fairly common among children 5 and under. An adult or older brother or sister pulls sharply on a child's arm causing a ligament to slip between two bones of the elbow joint, in effect dislocating it.

It usually happens innocently enough. Typically, you can be walking holding the child's hand tightly and the child suddenly pulls away from you while you are still tightly clasping the hand.

Symptoms

You may hear a popping sound as the portion of the elbow (radial head) dislocates.

- Child begins to cry in pain immediately
- Arm hangs limp at the side, bent slightly
- Elbow may appear displaced
- Pain may subside, but child will not use the arm

Don't Be Fooled

Even though the elbow is the source of the problem it's hard to get an accurate history from a little kid. They may say their shoulder or wrist hurts. They can't often isolate the source of what's ailing them. But if the child winces or cries when you touch the elbow you have located the source of the trouble.

How I Treat It

If your child is able to bend the elbow a little, supporting it in a cloth sling can keep it more comfortable on the way to the office or hospital.

I would always take an x-ray of the elbow before doing anything else. That is my personal preference, but I realize not everyone does this.

If I determine the radial head is indeed out of place I will probably try to gently manipulate it back into place. If this is not successful or the child is too hysterical, an anesthetic will be needed. Doing it in this way has always worked best for me.

Depending on the situation I would typically splint the elbow for a week or so to get some early tissue healing. Again, not everyone does this, but I think it helps.

Prevention

Parents, grandparents, older brothers and sisters. Listen up!

Never pull a little child up by the arm (or arms) and never swing them around by the arms.

You are asking for trouble. Make anyone taking care of your small child aware that pulling a child's arm or swinging them by the arms is a no no.

Argus Orthopaedic Zone Archive and Office Website

What if there was a whole world of musculoskeletal information at one place? There is!

www.orthopodsurgeon.com opens up for you the office website, Your Orthopaedic Connection and the Archive of all previous Argus articles I have written for you, your family and friends.

Please check it out. Do yourself a favor.

Be well.

Dr. Haverbush