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MBBS FRACS (Orthopaedics)
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CONDITION

Elbow Arthritis

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What is Elbow Arthritis?

This is characterised by a gradual wearing of the smooth surfaces within the elbow leading to bone grinding on bone causing inflammation and pain

What is elbow arthritis?

There are two broad types of elbow arthritis – osteoarthritis and inflammatory arthritis which includes rheumatoid arthritis. Osteoarthritis is wear and tear of the joint surfaces, which occurs either through chronic loading of the joint or after trauma to the elbow. Osteoarthritis is more common in men but may be present in women as well. Inflammatory arthritis causes a different pattern of damage to the joint and can occur in younger patients or in multiple joints around the body. Within the elbow, there are actually two joints – the ulnohumeral joint and the radio-capitellar joint, the later of which is on the outer aspect of the elbow. Either one or both of these joints may be affected by arthritis.

What symptoms does arthritis of the elbow cause?

If you have elbow arthritis, you may experience a spectrum of symptoms from catching, locking and occasional sharp pains to pain at night, crunching of the elbow and pain when you lift things with that arm. The pain is often felt at the extremes of motion and on rotation of the forearm. Stiffness and loss of motion is common, especially the ability to fully straighten the elbow, and the elbow may appear swollen.

Most symptoms are increased by activity, especially if it is repetitive or heavy in nature. Sometimes there may be tingling or numbness in the fingers which can be related to the arthritic bone spurs causing nerve irritation.

How is Elbow arthritis diagnosed?

An X ray of the elbow is sufficient to diagnose arthritis. In order to determine the type and pattern of arthritis, you may require some blood tests or a CT scan of the elbow. These tests will show the extent of the arthritis as well as exactly which areas of the elbow are affected. Occasionally an MRI scan is used to assess the soft tissue structures of the elbow. This information is very useful when planning treatment.

How can elbow arthritis be treated?

If you have inflammatory arthritis such as rheumatoid arthritis, you should be under the care of a rheumatologist who can help your pain considerably by using medications specifically for inflammatory arthritis. Regardless of the type of arthritis, simple measures such as rest, over the counter painkillers and activity modification are always worth trying first. It's important to maintain movement in the elbow as much as possible to prevent progressive stiffness.

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These notes are intended as a guide and some of the details may vary depending on your individual circumstance and at the discretion of your surgeon.

If the pain persists, a corticosteroid injection can be beneficial in the short term. Surgical options include keyhole or open debridement of the elbow to remove roughened bony prominences and loose

bone fragments that can catch, lock and rub against each other resulting in pain. Ultimately an elbow replacement may be required although this is actually quite uncommon.

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If you have any problems or concerns, do not hesitate to contact the office or myself. I can generally be reached on one of the numbers listed below and if I am not immediately available, I will try to get back to you as soon as possible. If for some reason I am unable to be reached, then you may be able to seek advice from the hospital ward or from your General Practitioner.

Bethesda Hospital 9340 6300
Hollywood Hospital 9346 6000