Osteoarthritis of the Elbows

This fact sheet has been written for people with elbow pain, due to osteoarthritis (OA). It provides general information about elbow pain and what can be done to help. It also tells you where to find further information.

This sheet is not meant for people with elbow pain from osteoporosis or other causes.

What causes OA in the elbows?

The elbow joint is made up of the humerus bone of the upper arm, and the ulna and radius bones of the lower arm.

In the elbow joint, the ends of the bones are covered with articular cartilage. Articular cartilage is slick and protects the bone ends from friction when they rub together as the elbow straightens and bends.

OA of the elbow develops when the joint's cartilage is damaged or becomes worn out. This can happen because of a previous injury such as elbow dislocation or fracture. It may also be the result of wear of the joint cartilage from age.

If the elbow cannot be moved through its normal range of motion, it may stiffen into a position where it is mostly bent. This is called flexion. This can also cause pressure around the nerve to increase.

What are the symptoms?

OA in the elbow usually affects a person's ability to straighten or bend the arm. The first thing most people notice is that it becomes difficult to completely straighten the arm. This is followed by an inability to bend the arm. This may cause pain when a person bends or straightens their arm.

After periods of activity, it is common to experience increased pain and stiffness. There may be swelling around the elbow, and it may feel tight, especially after using it.

In advanced stages of OA of the elbow, some people notice numbness in their ring finger and small finger. This can be caused by the swelling or limited range of motion in the joint at the elbow. This happens because the nerve that supplies the sensation to these two fingers is affected.

When all cartilage is worn off the elbow joint surface, you may experience 'crepitus', a creaking sensation in the joint during movement.

Should I see a doctor?

You should talk to your doctor or other health professional if your pain or other symptoms are bothering...
you. There are three points within the elbow joint that can be affected by OA and it is important that your doctor identifies the exact cause of the pain and stiffness coming from your elbow. They will ask you about your symptoms and examine you. They may ask you to obtain x-rays as these may be helpful in identifying the affected joint. They may also check for any serious medical problems that could be causing your pain, but these are rare.

What can I do?

1. Talk to your healthcare team. It is common to worry about the cause of your pain and how it will affect you. Talking to your doctor or another health professional about your worries can be helpful. You will usually find there is no serious cause and there are ways you can deal with it.

2. Learn about elbow pain and play an active role in your treatment. Not all information you read or hear about is trustworthy so always talk to your doctor or healthcare team about treatments you are thinking about trying. Reliable sources of further information are also listed in the section below. Self-management courses aim to help you develop skills to be actively involved in your healthcare. Contact your local Arthritis Office for details of these courses.

3. Learn ways to manage pain. Talk to your healthcare team about ways to relieve your pain, including the following:

4. Medicines. Many different types of medicines can help the symptoms of elbow OA. It’s best to start with simple analgesics and measure their effect before trying others. Your doctor or pharmacist can help you understand which medicines are right for you and how best to use them. Always talk to your doctor or pharmacist about your medicines, as even natural and over-the-counter medicines can have side effects.

5. Acknowledge your feelings and seek support. It is natural to feel scared, frustrated, sad and sometimes angry when you have pain. Be aware of these feelings and get help if necessary. You can learn skills to recognise and calm anxiety or strong emotions if you find they start to affect your daily life. See the ‘Awareness of thoughts & emotions treatment’ sheet.

Your healthcare team can give you more advice and information about whether any of these or other treatments might be useful for you.

Also see the following for more information:

- Complementary medicines treatment sheet
- Complementary therapies treatment sheet
- Simple pain relief medicines sheet
- NSAIDs treatment sheet
- ‘Medicines and arthritis’ fact sheet
- ‘Dealing with pain’ fact sheet

Get help and more information at www.MyJointPain.org.au
Your healthcare team can give you more advice and information about whether any of these or other treatments might be useful for you.

Other Resources

State/Territory Arthritis Offices
Your local Arthritis Office can provide further information to assist you and will have a range of education and support activities. Click here to find your local office.

Independent Living Centres (ILCs)
These centres provide information about products and services to help people remain independent and improve their quality of life. They are located in each capital city. See www.ilcaustralia.org.au or call the National ILC Infoline on 1300 885 886 to find your closest centre and more information. (In Queensland, the Independent Living Centre is called LifeTec).