



Pulled elbow

What is a pulled elbow?

A pulled elbow refers to a minor movement of one of the elbow bones causing it to slip out of position. It is a common minor injury in children under five years of age.

What causes it?

Ligaments hold bones in position. A pulled elbow occurs when the ligament is stretched. The bone slips under the ligament that is attaching it to the elbow and is not able to return to its normal position.

The stretching of the ligament can be caused by a sudden pulling or yanking of the child's forearm or wrist such as when a child is lifted by one arm, or when they are swung by the forearm. Occasionally, it can occur when a child falls onto their arm or twists their arm behind their back.

What are the symptoms?

- Immediate pain to the arm
- Refusal or inability to use or move the injured arm
- Protecting the injured arm, or hanging it limply by the side of the body
- Distress or anxiety

Investigations

Normally an x-ray is not required to diagnose a pulled elbow.

What is the treatment?

Treatment is manipulation of the injured arm by the doctor. This is usually a quick process that may cause some momentary pain however this will resolve once the elbow returns to the correct position. Your child will be observed until they begin using the arm again. This may take up to 30 minutes or longer. A sling is not usually required.

Occasionally the pulled elbow is not corrected completely at first presentation – in this case an x-ray may be taken and the arm immobilised in a sling for 24 hours. This will usually help reduce any swelling and the “pull” will fix itself. If your child is still not using their arm after 24 hours we recommend further medical review either by your GP or local Emergency Department.

If this happens again

Sometimes a pulled elbow can happen again. If you think your child has a pulled elbow apply an ice pack (use a shop bought ice pack or ice blocks placed in a plastic bag - ice packs should always be wrapped in a cloth).

- Give some pain relief such as paracetamol (Panadol).
- Be careful when touching or moving the arm and when putting on or removing clothing.
- Take your child to your GP or local Emergency Department.

Things to remember

- A pulled elbow will not cause any permanent or long term damage.
- Your child should not be picked up by the lower arms or wrists.
- Some children are more likely to get pulled elbows than others. Some may experience pulled elbows more than once.
- If you think you child has pulled elbow and is distressed, give pain relief.
- Do not try and relocate a pulled elbow yourself. Always see your GP or present to an Emergency Department.

