Elbow bursitis

This fact sheet is for people who have presented to the emergency department with this condition.

This fact sheet provides general information. If you have specific concerns, speak to your healthcare professional for further information and advice.

What is elbow bursitis?

The elbow (olecranon) bursa is a thin fluid-filled sac on the outside of the elbow, designed to protect the soft tissues from injury when you lean on your elbow. Bursitis is when the bursa becomes irritated and inflamed.

Symptoms

Common symptoms of bursitis include:

- pain, especially on active motion or when you bend the joint
- swelling at the affected site
- redness
- warmth.

Causes

Elbow bursitis can occur due to any of these reasons.

- **Trauma**: a hard blow to the tip of the elbow can cause the bursa to produce excess fluid and swell.
- **Infection**: if an injury such as an insect bite, scrape or puncture wound at the tip of the elbow breaks the skin, bacteria may get inside the bursa sac and cause an infection. The infected bursa produces fluid, redness, swelling and pain. If the infection goes untreated, the fluid may turn to pus. However, occasionally, the bursa sac may become infected without an obvious injury to the skin.
- **Medical conditions**: such as rheumatoid arthritis and gout are associated with elbow bursitis.
- **Prolonged pressure**: leaning on the tip of the elbow for long periods of time on hard surfaces, such as a tabletop, may cause the bursa to swell. Typically, this type of bursitis develops over several months.
- **Certain occupations**: are especially vulnerable to elbow bursitis, particularly plumbers or heating and air conditioning technicians who lean on their elbows in tight spaces . Certain athletic activities may also lead to elbow bursitis, such as holding the plank position for a long time. This can be common in yoga and other strengthening exercises.

- **Inflammatory conditions**: such as rheumatoid arthritis or long-standing gout.

Treatment

- It is important to avoid pressure on the area and protect it from further injury by using a cushion and resting the elbow joint.
- Apply an ice pack for 20 minutes several times each day.
- Simple anti-inflammatories will likely help. Check with your doctor which pain medications are safe for you to take.
- Steroid injection may be considered in certain situations, such as persistent pain and swelling.
- Very occasionally, where bothersome symptoms have been present for over a year, surgery may be considered.
- Elbow bursas can sometimes become infected (septic bursitis). This requires urgent medical attention and antibiotics.
- The symptoms of septic bursitis include redness, swelling and heat over the elbow and sometimes a fever. An infected bursa may need drainage or surgical removal.

What to expect

Bursal protection can prevent bursitis from getting worse or recurring. Some ways to protect your bursa and joints include:

- avoiding or modifying activities that cause pain
- using pads or cushions when leaning on your elbows
- wearing custom-fitted devices over the elbows to protect them and prevent fluid from building up again.

Return to the emergency department if:

- you develop a fever, redness or swelling over the joint, or redness spreading up or down the arm
- experience chest pain, heaviness in your chest, shortness of breath or dizziness
- your symptoms change or worsen.