



Sports Medicine: Elbow Dislocation

The elbow joint is made up of 3 bones – 1 upper arm bone (humerus) and 2 forearm bones (ulna and radius). An elbow dislocation is an injury to the elbow joint that causes the humerus and ulna to be moved from their normal spot, so they no longer fit together. An elbow dislocation is considered an emergency because of potential damage to the nerves and blood vessels that can pose major risks and problems.

Signs and symptoms

- severe elbow pain at the time of injury or when trying to move the elbow
- loss of elbow motion and function
- deformity of the elbow (does not look normal)
- tenderness, swelling, and bruising at the elbow
- numbness or tingling in the forearm or hand (rare)

Increased risk

- contact sports (football, rugby, basketball)
- previous elbow dislocations or sprains
- repeated elbow injuries
- events that involve jumping (high jump, pole vault, gymnastics)
- poor physical conditioning (strength and flexibility)

Treatment

The first course of treatment is the quick relocation of the bones by a health care provider to restore the joint to its normal position, followed by raising the elbow above the heart level to reduce swelling.

- Medicine
 - Anti-inflammatory medicines, such as ibuprofen (Motrin® or Advil®) or naproxen (Aleve®) may be recommended. Take these as directed by your health care provider.
 - Other minor pain relievers, such as acetaminophen (Tylenol®).

- Orthopedic aids
 - A splint, cast, or brace may be given to keep the elbow from moving and to allow the ligaments to heal.
- Use of cold and heat
 - Cold should be applied for 10 to 15 minutes every 2 to 3 hours for swelling and after any activity that makes symptoms worse. Use ice packs or an ice massage.
 - Heat should not be used on a new injury but may be used before performing stretching and strengthening activities prescribed by your health care provider or athletic trainer. Use a heat pack or warm soak. Apply for 10 to 15 minutes.
- Exercises
 - Exercises to restore full motion of the elbow and improve strength of the surrounding muscles are important. This should be done under the care of a physical therapist or athletic trainer.
- Surgery
 - In rare cases, surgery may be needed to repair the damaged nerves or blood vessels, or if pain or loss of function are still present following treatment.

How to prevent

- Do correct warm-up and stretching before practice or competition.
- Wearing elbow pads for contact sports.
- Maintain proper conditioning, strength, flexibility, endurance, and cardiovascular fitness.

When to call the health care provider

Call your health care provider or the **Sports Medicine team** at (614) 355-6000 if:

- pain, tenderness, or swelling worsens despite treatment
- you experience pain, numbness, or coldness in the elbow, forearm, or hand
- blue, gray, or dusky color appears in the fingernails
- new, unexplained symptoms develop

To schedule an appointment with Sports Medicine, visit [NationwideChildrens.org/SportsMedicineScheduling](https://www.nationwidechildrens.org/sports-medicine) or scan this code with your camera phone.

