



CONDITION

What is an Elbow Dislocation?

When the gliding surfaces of a joint become disconnected the joint is dislocated. If the joint surfaces are only partly disconnected the joint is called subluxed. Frequently there is an associated fracture of the adjacent bones.

Normal Elbow to show the Joint (gliding surfaces in white)



How do these injuries occur?

Sporting injuries or falls commonly cause elbow joint dislocations.

An xray of a dislocated elbow with a fracture, seen from the side



How is the diagnosis made?

The affected joint will look a peculiar shape and be painful. Xrays confirm the diagnosis and also show any fractures..

What is the treatment of these injuries?

Any dislocated or subluxed joint needs to be put back in place as soon as possible (reduced). This is usually done in the local Accident and Emergency department. Occasionally the joint is difficult to reduce or is difficult to keep lined up properly after the reduction and further input is required from a specialist, sometimes including surgery (see 'Elbow Fractures').

What complications can occur?

If the joint is reduced quickly, is stable after reduction and there are no associated fractures then a good recovery can be expected. The affected joint will be swollen and stiff however and some work will be necessary to recover full function. Elevation, ice packs and gentle stretching exercises are useful. The swelling can take several months to settle fully.

In about 3% of simple dislocations (ie with no associated fractures) a condition called heterotopic ossification develops. In this condition the soft tissues around the elbow stiffen with calcium deposits which eventually turn into bone. This is a difficult condition to treat as more surgery to remove the abnormal bone can just stimulate more bone to form. There is some evidence that bisphosphonates, radiotherapy and treatment with NSAIDs (anti-inflammatories such as indomethacin) can reduce the formation of heterotopic ossification but these are not without their own risk and are therefore not routinely prescribed. One of those options might be considered if you have suffered with heterotopic ossification previously however.

If there are fractures associated with your dislocation then recovery can be much more difficult and take longer. This depends on how severe the damage has been. The risk of heterotopic ossification is also increased. Your specialist will advise you regarding your particular injury pattern and its implications.