

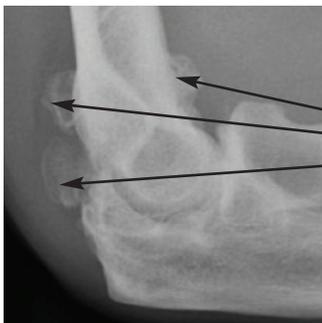


CONDITION

# What is Elbow Locking?

*This is a mechanical problem where loose bodies (free pieces of bone or cartilage) move around inside the elbow joint and get caught between the moving parts. When this happens the joint gets stuck until the loose body moves out of the way. The joint is often painful after this has happened.*

*Side View of the elbow showing osteophytes & loose bodies*



Extra pieces of bone around the joint

## What causes locking?

Osteoarthritis is the commonest cause of this symptom. As the arthritis progresses extra pieces of bone are sometimes made by the body around the edges of the joint. These are called osteophytes. Sometimes they can break off and become loose inside the joint.

Loose bodies can also form after fractures of the elbow, particularly those involving the smooth joint surface inside the joint.

## What are the signs and symptoms of locking?

Often there will be background symptoms of arthritis with intermittent pain, swelling and stiffness. The mechanical episodes of locking occur on top of these symptoms and usually feel quite different and are described as a feeling of something catching inside the joint.

## How is the diagnosis confirmed?

Often the history from you, the patient, is so clear as to make the diagnosis. Plain x-rays are taken to look for signs of previous joint injury and arthritis. Sometimes the loose bodies can be seen on the plain x-rays. Complex scans, such as computerised tomography (CT) and magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) are occasionally also requested but often do not add all that much extra information.

## What is the treatment?

General supportive measures, as used for arthritic, are useful such as keeping the joint as mobile as possible and resting the joint when it is very painful. Painkillers can be helpful in controlling the symptoms of arthritis and allow the joint to keep moving and functioning.

If the locking occurs frequently and is interfering with your function the best solution is to remove the loose bodies. Often this can be done with a small operation using a telescope to look into the joint pull out the loose bodies. This may need to be combined with a small open incision if the loose bodies are difficult to retrieve. The arthroscopy also gives more information about the state of the internal surface of the joint and therefore how arthritic it is.

Sometimes there are many loose bodies to be removed. The elbow is a complex joint with many spaces for the loose bodies to hide in. For both of these reasons it is not always possible to guarantee that every loose body has been removed.