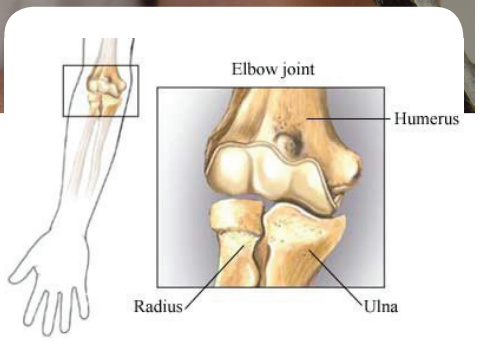
PT & Me
YOUR GUIDE TO PHYSICAL THERAPY

Elbow Conditions: ELBOW FRACTURE



An elbow fracture is a break in one or more of the bones that make up the elbow joint. The bones in the elbow joint are:

- Humerus–the upper arm bone
- Ulna–the larger of the forearm bones
- Radius–the smaller bone in the forearm

Causes

Elbow fractures are caused by trauma to the elbow bones. Trauma can be caused by:

- Falling on an outstretched arm
- Falling directly on the elbow
- Experiencing a direct blow to the elbow
- Twisting the elbow beyond the normal range of motion

Risk Factors

Factors that may increase your risk of getting an elbow fracture include:

- Advancing age
- Osteoporosis
- Certain diseases or conditions that result in bone or mineral loss, such as abnormal orabsent menstrual cycles, or post- menopause
- Certain diseases and conditions that weaken bones, such as tumors or cysts
- Decreased muscle mass
- Playing certain sports, such as football, hockey, wrestling, or gymnastics

Symptoms

Elbow fracture may cause:

- Pain (often severe)
- Tenderness, swelling, and bruising around the elbow
- Numbness in fingers, hand, or forearm
- Decreased range of motion
- A lump or visible deformity over the fracture site

PT & Me
YOUR GUIDE TO PHYSICAL THERAPY

Elbow Conditions: ELBOW FRACTURE

Diagnosis

The doctor will ask about your symptoms, physical activity, and how the injury occurred. The area will be examined. Imaging tests may include:

- X-rays to look for a break in the elbow area
- CT scan to look at the cartilage and tendons around the elbow

Treatment

The initial concern of an elbow fracture is that it is allowed sufficient time to heal so that scar tissue does not restrict elbow range. A non-surgical elbow will likely have to stay generally immobilized for 3-7 days with only supervised motion. This period is called the inflammatory phase and the swelling and pain at this phase may limit all beneficial motion. If the fracture is stable through surgical fixation, the physical therapist may begin moving the elbow gently. The first stage is likely to be gentle passive, or guided, motion where the therapists guides the motion and reduces forces on the elbow. Over time, the therapist will educated you on how to begin using the elbow's own muscles to bend and extend the arm. As the fracture continues to heal, the arm will perform closer to 100% of its own motion throughout the full expected range. Once the physician says that the fracture is closed, the therapist will move you into the strengthening phase that will help to get you back to your normal activity level.

Your physical therapist's goal is to help you return to the activities of daily living and recreation that you performed before the fracture. You may need to modify activities that will put direct impact on your elbow for 6-9 months but strength and range of motion will continue to progress. Keep up with the home exercise program that your therapist gives you so that you will continue to see improvement after therapy ends.

Prevention

To help reduce your chance of getting an elbow fracture, take these steps:

- Do not put yourself at risk for a trauma to the elbow.
- Exercise regularly to maintain strength, agility, and to prevent falls.
- Learn the proper technique and wear protective equipment for exercise and sporting activities.

To help reduce falling hazards at work and home, take these steps:

- Clean spills and slippery areas right away
- Remove tripping hazards such as loose cords, rugs, and clutter
- Use non-slip mats in the bathtub and shower
- Install grab bars next to the toilet and in the shower or tub
- Put in handrails on both sides of stairways
- Walk only in well-lit rooms, stairs, and halls
- Keep flashlights on hand in case of a power outage

This content was created using EBSCO's Health Library
references provided online