

Surgical procedure

Total Elbow Replacement

IMPORTANT INFORMATION

This surgical fact sheet is for general information about this procedure only. It is not intended to be used as medical advice or to replace advice that your relevant healthcare professional would give you. If you have a particular medical problem, please consult a healthcare professional. If your injury or illness is critical or life threatening, call triple zero (000). To speak to a registered nurse, call healthdirect on 1800 022 222.

Notes and questions to bring to your doctor

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For more help with what to ask your doctor, visit healthdirect.gov.au/question-builder

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This document will give you information about a total elbow replacement. If you have any questions, you should ask your GP or other relevant health professional.

What is arthritis?

Arthritis is a group of conditions that causes damage to one or more joints.

The most common type of arthritis is osteoarthritis, where there is gradual wear and tear of a joint. Some other types of arthritis are associated with inflammation of the joints. Arthritis eventually wears away the normal cartilage covering the surface of the joint and the bone underneath becomes damaged. This causes pain and stiffness in the joint.

What are the benefits of surgery?

You should get less pain and be able to move your arm more easily.

Are there any alternatives to a total elbow replacement?

Simple painkillers such as paracetamol and anti-inflammatory painkillers such as ibuprofen can help control the pain of arthritis. Supplements to your diet may also help relieve your symptoms. Check with your doctor before you take supplements.

Regular moderate exercise can help to reduce stiffness in your elbow.

A steroid injection into your elbow joint can sometimes reduce pain and stiffness.

Sometimes it is possible to have a smaller operation to remove inflamed tissue.

All these measures become less effective if your arthritis gets worse.

What does the operation involve?

Various anaesthetic techniques are possible. The operation usually takes one to two hours. Your surgeon will make a cut on the back of your elbow and remove the damaged joint surfaces. They will replace these with an artificial elbow made with metal, plastic or ceramic, or a combination of these materials (see figure 1). Your elbow replacement is fixed into the bone using acrylic cement.



Figure 1

A total elbow replacement

What complications can happen?

1 General complications

- Pain
- Bleeding
- Infection of the surgical site (wound)
- Unsightly scarring
- Blood clots
- Chest infection
- Heart attack
- Stroke

2 Specific complications

- Damage to nerves
- Infection
- Loosening
- Dislocation
- Fracture
- Severe pain, stiffness and loss of use of your hand (complex regional pain syndrome)

How soon will I recover?

You should be able to go home after 2 to 5 days. You will need to use a support for your elbow for six weeks.

Regular exercise should help you to return to normal activities as soon as possible. Before you start exercising, ask the healthcare team or your GP for advice.

Most people make a good recovery, have less pain, and can move their elbow better. An artificial elbow never feels quite the same as a normal elbow. It is unlikely that you will be able to fully straighten your elbow.

An elbow replacement can wear out with time.

Summary

An elbow replacement is usually suitable for people who have arthritis. If you have severe pain, stiffness and disability, an elbow replacement should reduce your pain and help you to move your arm more easily.

Acknowledgements

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