

My Elbow Won't Straighten Fully

Understanding Elbow Extension Loss

Why Can't I Straighten My Elbow?

Loss of full elbow extension — the ability to fully straighten the arm — is one of the most functionally limiting problems a person can have with their upper extremity. Even a 10–15° loss of extension noticeably affects daily activities like reaching, pushing, and bearing weight on the arm. Unlike the knee, the elbow is particularly prone to developing stiffness and contracture after injury, surgery, or even prolonged immobilization.

What Are the Most Common Causes?

After injury or surgery:

- Post-traumatic stiffness — scar tissue forming in and around the joint capsule
- Elbow fracture with inadequate early mobilization
- Elbow dislocation — the capsule tightens significantly after dislocation
- Heterotopic ossification — abnormal bone formation in the soft tissues after trauma

Arthritis-related:

- Osteophytes (bone spurs) physically blocking full extension
- Loose bodies catching in the joint at end range

Tennis elbow-related:

- Acute tennis elbow can cause protective guarding that limits extension over time

What Does It Feel Like?

- A hard or firm "stop" at end range — the joint physically blocks further movement
- A soft, stretching end feel — tight capsule or scar tissue preventing full extension
- Pain at the end of available range
- Difficulty reaching forward fully, pushing open a door, or bearing weight on the arm
- The arm rests in a slightly bent position even when relaxed

How Is It Treated?

- Prolonged low-load stretching — gentle sustained force over time is far more effective than aggressive short stretches
- Joint mobilization — hands-on techniques to loosen the joint capsule
- Dynamic splinting or static progressive splinting — applies a constant gentle stretch over hours
- Serial casting — progressive casts applied to hold the elbow at increasing extension angles
- Surgical capsular release — for cases with hard bony or mechanical blocks unresponsive to PT

When Should I Be Concerned?

- Stiffness that is not improving at all despite 6+ weeks of consistent PT
- Rapid onset of stiffness with warmth and swelling — possible heterotopic ossification
- Pain and stiffness following a new injury

The Good News

Elbow extension loss due to soft tissue restriction — not a hard bony block — responds very well to physical therapy. Prolonged low-load stretching programs and joint mobilization consistently restore meaningful range of motion in most patients. Starting PT early after an injury or surgery is the single most important factor in preventing long-term stiffness.

Starting PT early after elbow injury or surgery is the most important factor in preventing and reversing extension loss.

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