

Elbow Arthritis

What You Need to Know

What Is Elbow Arthritis?

While the elbow is less commonly affected by arthritis than the knee or hip, it can become significantly arthritic — particularly after prior injury, dislocation, or fracture (post-traumatic arthritis), or as part of rheumatoid arthritis. Primary osteoarthritis of the elbow is less common but does occur, particularly in people who have performed heavy manual labor or overhead work for many years. Loose bodies (fragments of cartilage or bone floating in the joint) are a common complication of elbow arthritis.

What Does It Feel Like?

- A deep aching pain in the elbow, often on the outer side
- Stiffness — particularly in the morning or after the elbow has been still for a while
- Loss of full range of motion — both in bending and straightening the elbow (extension loss is most common)
- A grinding or crunching sensation with movement
- Locking or catching — if loose bodies are present
- Aching and swelling after use
- In rheumatoid arthritis: significant warmth, swelling, and pain in multiple joints

What Makes It Worse?

- Lifting, carrying, or gripping objects
- Forced extension (fully straightening the elbow under load)
- Repetitive loading — using tools, manual work, gym exercises
- Cold weather for many patients

When Should I Be Concerned?

- Sudden severe locking — may indicate a loose body requiring removal
- Rapid increase in swelling with warmth and fever — possible infection or severe RA flare

- New or worsening numbness in the hand — nerve compression from bony changes

The Good News

Elbow arthritis is very manageable with physical therapy. Maintaining range of motion, building the strength of the surrounding muscles, using activity modification strategies, and learning joint protection techniques can keep the elbow functioning well for many years. Many patients avoid surgery entirely with the right conservative program.

With the right PT program, most patients with elbow arthritis can keep the joint functioning well for many years and delay or avoid surgery.

This information is for general educational purposes only and is not a substitute for a professional evaluation. Call us today — we have immediate openings with no waitlist.

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