

ADVERTISEMENT

Your health questions, answered

Our experts share insights and advice in [Health Essentials](#) News

Sign Up

ADVERTISEMENT

Elbow Replacement Surgery

If your elbow constantly hurts and is stiff from arthritis or other causes, elbow replacement surgery is an option. Surgery can help relieve chronic pain and restore motion to a damaged elbow.

APPOINTMENTS & ACCESS

CONTACT US

Procedure Details

Risks / Benefits

Recovery and Outlook

When to Call the Doctor

Overview

What is elbow replacement surgery?

Elbow replacement surgery (sometimes referred to as total elbow arthroplasty) is an operation that surgeons use to relieve pain and restore motion to a damaged elbow. During this surgery, a doctor replaces your elbow joint with an artificial joint.

Elbow replacement surgery does not always involve the entire elbow. In some people, doctors replace only part of the joint, such as the radial head (the knobby head of the radius bone where it meets the elbow).

Elbow replacement surgery improves quality of life for many people. It can relieve pain and allow you to return to activities you enjoy.

Why is elbow replacement surgery done?

The elbow joint brings together three bones called the humerus, ulna and radius. At the ends of these bones where they come together, they are covered by a specialized structure called cartilage. Cartilage provides a smooth surface on which the bones can glide against one another. Damage to the bones or cartilage can cause chronic (long-term) pain, swelling and stiffness of the joint.

Doctors perform elbow replacement surgery to relieve pain and increase range of motion in people with chronic elbow pain. This surgery often improves people's quality of life when medications or physical therapy (exercises to improve strength and mobility) do not ease their pain adequately.

Conditions that may lead to elbow replacement surgery include:

- Injury:** A broken or cracked bone in the elbow.
- Osteoarthritis:** Worn-down cartilage in the joints.
- Rheumatoid arthritis:** An autoimmune disorder involving inflammation (swelling) of the joints.

Procedure Details

What should I do to prepare for elbow replacement surgery?

Your doctor may ask you to stop taking certain medications before elbow replacement surgery. These medications can cause extra bleeding and include:

- Arthritis medications.
- Blood thinners.
- Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs)**, including ibuprofen and aspirin.
- Most patients consult with pre-admissions testing where the specifics of what medications to continue or discontinue are discussed in detail.

You will have limited arm mobility for several weeks after elbow replacement surgery as you recover. Before surgery, you may want to move items you use regularly to low shelves in your home so they are easy to reach.

What should I expect during elbow replacement surgery?

During surgery, your doctor will remove the damaged tissue and replace it with the artificial joint. Doctors can use two different types of artificial joints for elbow replacement surgery. The type of joint depends on the reason for the operation.

Your artificial elbow joints could be:

- Linked:** A hinge connects metal stems implanted into the ends of the humerus and the ulna. This type is most common.
- Unlinked:** Your own joint tissue connects the metal stems in the ulna and humerus.

What should I expect after elbow replacement surgery?

Most people need to keep their arm elevated for as much as they can for several days after elbow replacement surgery to reduce swelling. Your doctor will give you medications, including NSAIDs, to manage pain.

You will learn gentle exercises to help the elbow heal and improve your ability to move it. In most cases, doctors tell people to wait until six weeks after surgery to push forcefully with their hand or bear weight on the affected arm. Many patients work with therapists in a monitored rehabilitation program.

Risks / Benefits

What are the risks of elbow replacement surgery?

Complications of elbow replacement surgery can happen during surgery or develop over time like all surgeries.

Risks of elbow replacement surgery include:

- Bleeding.
- Damage to surrounding nerves during surgery.
- Dislocation of the artificial joint.
- Infection.
- Problems with the implant, like loosening or wearing down of parts of the artificial joint over time.
- Reactions to [anesthesia](#).

Recovery and Outlook

What is the prognosis (outlook) for people who have elbow replacement surgery?

Recovery from elbow replacement surgery takes about three months. After healing from elbow replacement surgery, many people have less pain in the elbow with better mobility and function.

Your doctor may tell you to avoid activities such as heavy lifting and contact sports after an elbow replacement. Being careful can help reduce the risk of further damage to your elbow or the implant. Doctors recommend people do not lift anything heavier than seven pounds after elbow replacement surgery.

When to Call the Doctor

When should I call my doctor?

After elbow replacement surgery, contact your doctor if you have:

- Bleeding, redness, warmth or draining at the incision site.
- Feeling of dislocation or looseness of the new joint.
- Fever over 101 degrees Fahrenheit with no other symptoms.

SHARE

f

twitter

in

envelope

print

Last reviewed by a Cleveland Clinic medical professional on 02/04/2020.

References

Get useful, helpful and relevant health + wellness information

Enter your email

SIGN UP!

ENews

ADVERTISEMENT

Your health questions, answered

Our experts share insights and advice in [Health Essentials](#) News

Sign Up

ADVERTISEMENT

More health news + info

Loading...

SHOW MORE

APPOINTMENTS & ACCESS

CONTACT US



Actions

Appointments & Access

Accepted Insurance

Events Calendar

Financial Assistance

Give to Cleveland Clinic

Pay Your Bill Online

Refer a Patient

Phone Directory

Virtual Second Opinions

Virtual Visits

Blog, News & Apps

Consult QD

Health Essentials

Newsroom

MyClevelandClinic

MyChart

About Cleveland Clinic

100 Years of Cleveland Clinic

About Us

Locations

Quality & Patient Safety

Office of Diversity & Inclusion

Patient Experience

Research & Innovations

Community Commitment

Careers

For Employees

Resources for Medical Professionals

Site Information & Policies

Send Us Feedback

Site Map

About this Website

Copyright, Reprint & Licensing

Website Terms of Use

Privacy Policy

Notice of Privacy Practices

Non-Discrimination Notice