

Elbow (Olecranon) Bursitis

What is elbow (olecranon) bursitis?

A bursa is a fluid-filled sac that acts as a cushion between tendons, bones, and skin. Irritation or inflammation of a bursa is called bursitis. Olecranon bursitis causes pain or swelling at the point of the elbow.

How does it occur?

Repeated injury, such as falling onto the elbow or rubbing the elbow against a hard surface, causes irritation to the bursa.

What are the symptoms?

The bursa at the point of the elbow is swollen. This swelling may or may not be painful. It may hurt to bend and straighten your elbow. There may be warmth and redness. Sometimes the fluid inside the bursa can become infected.

How is it diagnosed?

Your health care provider will review your symptoms and examine your elbow.

How is it treated?

Treatment may include:

- ▶ putting ice packs on your elbow for 20 to 30 minutes every 3 to 4 hours for 2 to 3 days or until the pain and swelling go away
- ▶ wrapping an elastic bandage around your elbow to keep the bursa from swelling more
- ▶ removal of some of the bursa fluid by your health care provider with a needle and syringe
- ▶ taking anti-inflammatory medication
- ▶ protecting your elbow with a pad.

In some cases, problems with longstanding (chronic) olecranon bursitis may require surgical removal of the bursa.

When can I return to my sport or activity?

The goal of rehabilitation is to return you to your sport or activity as soon as is safely possible. If you return too soon you may worsen your injury, which could lead to permanent damage. Everyone recovers from injury at a different rate. Return to your sport will be determined by how soon your elbow recovers, not by how many days or weeks it has been since your injury occurred. In general, the longer you have symptoms before you start treatment, the longer it will take to get better.

You may return to your sport or activity when you are able to forcefully grip your tennis racquet, bat, or golf club, or do activities such as working at a keyboard without pain at your elbow. In sports such as gymnastics, you should be able to bear weight on your elbow painlessly. You should have no swelling around your injured elbow and it should have regained its normal strength compared to your uninjured elbow. You must have full range of motion of your elbow.

How can I prevent olecranon bursitis?

Olecranon bursitis can be best prevented by avoiding direct contact to the point of your elbow. It is important not to irritate the bursa by leaning your elbow onto a surface such as a table or a desk.

