

**Patient  
Information**

# Pulled elbow (radial head subluxation)

## Introduction

You have been given this leaflet because your child has been examined and diagnosed with a pulled elbow.

## What is a pulled elbow?

Pulled elbow is a common injury suffered by children usually between the age of 1 and 5 years. Ligaments normally hold the joint in place, but in some incidents it is possible that the ligaments are stretched and one of the bones (radial head) partially slips out of joint.

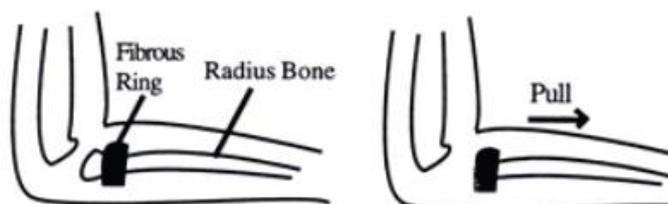
It is unusual for children over 5 years old to get a pulled elbow, as their joints are a lot stronger. In most cases, children with a pulled elbow will cry straightaway and will not use the injured arm at all, or they will simply have it hanging by their side.

## What causes a pulled elbow?

It is often the result of a sudden jerking or pulling action on the child's arm or forearm, for example catching hold of a child's arm to prevent them running into the road or falling over. This sudden tug on the arm pulls the radius through the annular ligament which may partially tear and become entrapped between the radial head and the capitellum. This results in subluxation (partial dislocation) of the radial head.

This is not the same as a dislocation where the bones in the joint are not lined up correctly.

## Diagram of a child's elbow joint



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## Treatment

The arm will be moved or manipulated (put back into place) by a nurse or doctor. This is done by moving or twisting the arm slightly and may cause a brief period of discomfort. Sometimes if the elbow has been out of place for a long period, it will take longer to recover.

In this case your child may need some medication for discomfort. Usually your child will be able to use the arm fairly soon after this; although they may be reluctant to do so because they will associate movement with discomfort. One way in which to encourage your child to use the arm again is with the distraction of a toy.

## Does my child need an X-ray?

If the nurse or doctor is sure that the injury is a pulled elbow, an X-ray is not necessary because there is no injury to the bones.

## Following discharge

Generally after the elbow is manipulated, your child will use the arm normally and will not require pain relief medication. If the elbow was 'out' for a while, then your child may need some pain relief medication for that day. If your child is not moving the arm fully by the next day, they will need to see a health practitioner again.

Remember – once a child has had a pulled elbow, it is much more likely to reoccur and they will need to be assessed by a health care professional– please see where further info can be obtained. You should try not to tug on your child's arm such as when playing games because your child is much more likely to have another pulled elbow once they have had one. This can be to either arm.

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## Further information

Further information may be obtained via your GP, NHS 111 or NHS choices.

### **NHS 111**

Tel: 111

### **NHS Choices website**

Website: [www.nhs.uk/conditions/armpain/Pages/Introduction.aspx](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/armpain/Pages/Introduction.aspx)

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