

The Stiff Elbow

Reduced motion of the elbow can make it difficult to perform even simple tasks. It may be difficult to bend or straighten your elbow or turn your palm up (to wash your face) or turn the palm down.

Causes

Elbow stiffness is usually the result of an injury. Arthritis can also cause stiffness in some people.

Treatment

Treatment for elbow stiffness often starts with exercises, stretching and splinting (**Figure 1**) by a physical or hand/upper extremity therapist. If therapy does not work, then surgery could be performed to remove tight structures that are stopping the elbow from moving.

Surgery can be performed through an incision or with arthroscopy, which is when a camera is used to look into the elbow. You should discuss these options with your surgeon. Patients often need to stay in the hospital after surgery to treat pain and begin physical therapy. Patients usually require extensive physical therapy after surgery.

Prognosis

Most patients who have surgery are improved enough to return to most activities. However, surgical risks include damage to nerves or blood vessels and returning stiffness, and your surgeon should discuss these risks with you. Sometimes your doctor will prescribe either a short dose of radiation or medication to reduce the chance for returning stiffness.

