

Elbow Osteoarthritis

Osteoarthritis is the most common type of arthritis. Elbow osteoarthritis is a condition which affects the cartilage covering the end of the bones which form elbow joint. The cartilage becomes thinned and the joint surface becomes roughened. The body tries to repair the changes to the joint cartilage. This natural repair process leads to several physical changes within the elbow joint and these changes can cause the symptoms of osteoarthritis. The pain experience can be affected by many other factors including your mood, beliefs, sleep, lifestyle and general health.

What are the Symptoms of Osteoarthritis?

In some cases there are no symptoms at all. Otherwise, people may experience a range of different symptoms with elbow osteoarthritis. Common symptoms include pain, stiffness and reduced function. The symptoms are usually worse with movement. For example, some people may find lifting and carrying activities difficult. Symptoms can also be worse for the first 30 minutes in the morning. As well as your physical health, osteoarthritis can affect your mental health and social wellbeing.

What Causes Osteoarthritis?

The exact cause of osteoarthritis is unclear. There are several factors that can increase your risk of developing osteoarthritis. Some of the possible causes include:

- **Age** – it usually affects people from their late 40s.
- **Gender** – osteoarthritis is more common in women.
- **Previous injury**- for example a fracture or a dislocated joint.
- **Genetics**- the genes we inherit.
- **Physical jobs or other regular activities** which put repeated strain on your elbow joints may be a contributing factor.

What Can I do to Help Myself Manage my Elbow Osteoarthritis?

The main form of treatment and management is lifestyle changes and exercise. Exercise will help you keep your joints moving and muscles strong. You will need to find the right balance between rest and exercise. You should build up your exercise programme gradually. There are a range of different types of exercises which will help you manage elbow osteoarthritis including:

There are different types of exercises:

- Exercises which help to maintain or improve the strength of the muscles around your elbow.
- Exercises which help to keep or improve the range of movement in the elbow joint.

- Exercises which maintain and improve your general health and fitness and muscle, bone and joint health like swimming, running or jogging.

Medication can help you manage the pain and enable you to stay active and participate in exercise and physical activities. Over the counter medication such as paracetamol or non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs like ibuprofen can help. Always refer to the information sheets provided with the medication. Your pharmacist or GP will be able to give you advice about these or other types of medication.

Some people find hot or cold packs helpful for managing the symptoms of osteoarthritis. Always protect your skin and follow the guidance on your own pack. Try hot or cold and try different times of day to find out what works best for you. Generally, keep the time to less than 20 minutes for each application. You may repeat it a couple of times through the day.

Who May be Able to Support me to Manage my Elbow Osteoarthritis?

A physiotherapist or osteopath will be able to help you learn and understand how to manage your condition. They may prescribe a specific exercise programme tailored to your needs and goals. These exercises may be completed at home, in the therapy department or in your community gym/sports facilities.

Are there any other options?

Injections

If you are in a lot of pain despite trying appropriate pain management strategies, a steroid injection may help you to control the pain for a period of time to enable you to exercise the elbow. If you think you would benefit from an injection you should speak to your clinician. Injections have risks and benefits which must be discussed in relation to your personal situation. Injections are not appropriate for some people who take particular medications or have specific health conditions.

Surgery

If your symptoms are severe and significantly impact on your daily life and you have not improved with the appropriate management options described above, surgery may be a possible option. The associated risk, benefits and eligibility for surgical intervention needs to be discussed with your clinician on an individual basis.