

Expires end of January 2024

Patient Information for Consent

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What is an elbow fracture?

The most common elbow fracture in children is a break of the end of the humerus just above the elbow.



An elbow fracture

Your surgeon has suggested an operation to treat your child's broken elbow.

This document will give you information about the benefits and risks to help you to be involved in the decision. If you think your child is mature enough, it is best to discuss the operation with them so they can be involved in the decision too.

If you have any questions that this document does not answer, ask your surgeon or the healthcare team.

How does an elbow fracture happen?

Most elbow fractures happen when a child falls from a height (such as play equipment) onto their hand with their arm stretched out.

A child's bones are still flexible so the damage may involve just a bend in a bone or a small crack. However, the damage can be more severe with the bone completely broken.

What are the benefits of surgery?

The aim is to move the pieces of bone into a good position and hold them there while the fracture heals. This should help your child's elbow to get back to normal.

Are there any alternatives to surgery?

Some elbow fractures heal well in a cast or sling. Even if the bone heals with a mild bend, it is possible that the bone will straighten as your child grows. This depends on the age of your child and how out of place the pieces of bone are.

The more out of place the pieces of bones are, the more likely it is that your surgeon will recommend an operation.

What will happen if I decide that my child will not have the operation?

Your child's elbow will be put in a cast or sling.

If the bone does not heal in a good enough position, your child is more likely to have problems moving their elbow and their elbow may not have a normal shape. It is also possible for the nerve that runs behind the elbow to overstretch, causing numbness, pain or weakness in your fingers.

If the bone does not straighten as your child grows, your surgeon may recommend an operation to reset the bone.

What does the operation involve?

The healthcare team will carry out a number of checks to make sure your child has the operation they came in for and on the correct side. You can help by confirming to your surgeon and the healthcare team your child's name and the operation they are having.

The operation is performed under a general anaesthetic. Your child may be given antibiotics during the operation to reduce the risk of infection.

There are several ways of treating your child's fractured elbow.

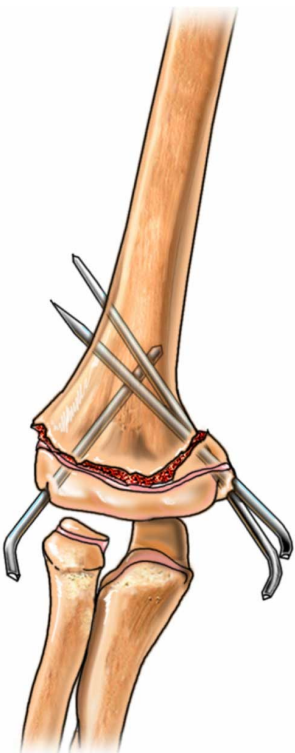
Your surgeon will manipulate the pieces of bone into a good position. They will decide if a cast or sling is enough to hold the pieces of bone in place.

Your surgeon may need to hold the pieces of bone in place with wires inserted through the skin.

Sometimes they may need to make a cut on the elbow so they can make sure the ulnar nerve is not damaged while they put the wires in.

For some fractures, your surgeon will need to make a larger cut on the elbow so they can move the pieces of bone into a good position.

Your surgeon will discuss which option is likely to be best for your child.



The fracture fixed using wires

They will close any cuts on the skin with stitches and put your child's elbow in a cast or sling. The stitches may be dissolvable.

What can I do to help make my child's operation a success?

Your child can reduce their risk of infection in a surgical wound.

- Your child should have a bath or shower either the day before or on the day of their operation.

- Your child should keep warm around the time of the operation. Let the healthcare team know if your child feels cold.

What complications can happen?

The healthcare team will try to reduce the risk of complications.

Any numbers which relate to risk are from studies of people who have had this operation. Your doctor may be able to tell you if the risk of a complication is higher or lower for your child.

Some complications can be serious.

You should ask your doctor if there is anything you do not understand.

Your anaesthetist will be able to discuss with you the possible complications of having an anaesthetic.

General complications of any operation

- Bleeding during or after the operation.
- Infection of the surgical site (wound). It is usually safe to shower after 2 days but you should check with the healthcare team. You must keep the cast or sling dry. Let the healthcare team know if your child gets a high temperature, you notice pus in their wound, or if their wound becomes red, sore or painful. An infection usually settles with antibiotics but your child may need special dressings and their wound may take some time to heal. In some cases another operation might be needed. Do not give your child antibiotics unless you are told they need them.
- Allergic reaction to the equipment, materials or medication. The healthcare team are trained to detect and treat any reactions that might happen. Let the doctor know if your child has any allergies or if they have reacted to any medication, tests or dressings in the past.

Specific complications of this operation

- Damage to nerves, leading to a patch of numb skin or restriction in finger movement (risk: 1 in 20). This usually gets better but may be permanent.

- Infection around a wire (risk: 1 in 20). This usually settles when the wire is removed.
- Infection of the bone caused by an infection around a wire (risk: 1 in 100). Your child will need a course of antibiotics or another operation.
- The bones move out of position. Your child will have an x-ray after about a week to check the position of the pieces of bone. Sometimes the bones have moved enough out of place for your surgeon to recommend another operation.
- Reduced movement in your child's elbow (risk: 1 in 2). This can happen if the fracture involved the growing part of a bone or the fracture does not heal well.

Consequences of this procedure

- Pain. The healthcare team will give your child medication to control the pain and it is important that they take it as you are told so they can move about as advised.
- Unsightly scarring of the skin.

How soon will my child recover?

In hospital

After the operation your child will be transferred to the recovery area and then to the ward. They should be able to go home the same day or the day after. However, your doctor may recommend that your child stays a little longer.

If you are worried about anything, in hospital or at home, contact the healthcare team. They should be able to reassure you or identify and treat any complications.

Returning to normal activities

Your child should recover quickly and be back to normal within a few days.

You must keep the cast or sling dry to reduce the risk of infection and help prevent the pieces of bone from moving out of place.

It is usual for children to return to school after 3 to 7 days.

Your child should keep their elbow raised on a pillow for a few days so that the swelling settles. It is important to encourage them to move their fingers to help reduce any stiffness.

Most fractures heal in about a month and then the cast or sling is removed. Your doctor will advise you on how much longer you should keep your child from doing activities such as contact sports, climbing on play equipment and riding a bicycle.

If your surgeon used wires, they will usually be removed at the same time as the cast or sling. This procedure does not always need another anaesthetic unless the wires have become buried in the skin.

The future

Most children make a good recovery and are able to return to normal activities.

If the fracture involved the growing part of a bone or the fracture does not heal well, your child's elbow movement may be slightly reduced (risk: 1 in 2). However, this should not prevent your child from using their elbow normally.

Summary

For some types of elbow fracture, an operation is the best way to make sure the pieces of bone heal in a good position.

Surgery is usually safe and effective but complications can happen. You need to know about them to help you to make an informed decision about surgery for your child. Knowing about them will also help you to help the healthcare team to detect and treat any problems early.

Keep this information document. Use it to help you if you need to talk to the healthcare team.

Some information, such as risk and complication statistics, is taken from global studies and/or databases. Please ask your surgeon or doctor for more information about the risks that are specific to you, and they may be able to tell you about any other suitable treatments options.

This document is intended for information purposes only and should not replace advice that your relevant healthcare team would give you.

Acknowledgements

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Adam Watts (MBBS, FRCS)

Sally Hobson (MRCS, FRCS)

Stephen Megson (BSc, MBChB, FRACS)

Illustrator

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