

Arthroscopy of the Elbow

What is Elbow Arthroscopy?

Elbow arthroscopy, also known as **keyhole surgery**, is a **minimally invasive procedure** used to **diagnose and treat elbow joint conditions**. It involves inserting a **small telescope (arthroscope)** through tiny incisions to visualize the **internal joint structures**. Specialized instruments may be used to **repair or remove damaged tissues** without requiring a larger incision.

Your **surgeon has recommended an elbow arthroscopy**, but the decision to proceed is yours. This document provides **essential information** regarding the **procedure, benefits, and risks** to assist in making an **informed choice**.

If you have **any questions**, consult your **surgeon or healthcare team**. Once all concerns are addressed and you decide to proceed, you will be asked to **sign an informed consent form**, marking the **final step in the decision-making process**. However, you may **change your mind at any time** before the surgery.

Benefits of Surgery

The primary objective of elbow arthroscopy is to **accurately diagnose the issue** and, in many cases, provide **immediate treatment**. Compared to open surgery, keyhole surgery typically results in **less postoperative pain** and, for some patients, a **faster recovery**.

Alternatives to Surgery

Imaging tests such as **MRI and CT scans** can help diagnose elbow conditions. However, they may **not detect early joint damage, small ligament injuries, or the extent of cartilage deterioration**. If these tests do not provide a definitive diagnosis, **arthroscopy may be necessary** for both **evaluation and treatment**.

Consequences of Not Having the Surgery

Without arthroscopy, your **surgeon may not be able to determine the most effective treatment**. If the procedure is required for treatment, **your symptoms may worsen over time**. In some cases, **symptoms may resolve naturally** or with **activity modifications**, but **persistent pain, stiffness, or limited movement** may necessitate **surgical intervention** to prevent further complications.



An arthroscopy of the elbow

What Does the Operation Involve?

Before coming to the hospital, **remove any rings** from your hand. The healthcare team will perform **several checks** to confirm the procedure and its correct side. You can assist by **verifying your name and the procedure with your surgeon and healthcare team**.

Elbow arthroscopy is generally performed under **general anaesthesia**, but in some cases, a **nerve block** may be used, where **local anaesthetic and painkillers** are injected near the major arm nerves. Your **anaesthetist will discuss** the best option for you. **Local anaesthetic injections** may also be given post-surgery to manage pain. Additionally, **antibiotics** may be administered during the procedure to minimize the risk of infection.

The **procedure lasts approximately 30 minutes**. A **small frame** supports your arm, and fluid is injected into the joint to enhance visualization. A **tourniquet (tight strap)** is often used to **reduce bleeding**.

The surgeon will make **two to four small incisions**, each about **half a centimetre long**, around the joint. A **small telescope (arthroscope)** is inserted through one incision to examine the joint, while **surgical instruments** may be used through the others to address any joint issues.

The procedure may involve **flushing out loose debris, removing loose fragments, or smoothing rough joint surfaces** caused by wear and tear. Once completed, the incisions are closed with **stitches or adhesive plasters**.

Medication Considerations

Inform the healthcare team about **all medications** you take, including **blood thinners, herbal supplements, dietary supplements, and over-the-counter drugs**. Follow their instructions regarding adjustments before surgery.

Preparing for the Operation

- **Smoking cessation** can **reduce complications** and improve long-term recovery.
- **Maintaining a healthy weight** lowers the risk of surgical complications.
- **Regular exercise** before surgery can **aid recovery and overall health**. Seek guidance from your healthcare team or GP before starting an exercise regimen.
- **Reducing infection risks:**
 - Avoid **shaving or waxing** the surgical area in the week leading up to the operation.
 - Take a **bath or shower** the day before or on the day of surgery.
 - **Stay warm** around the time of the procedure and inform the healthcare team if you feel cold.
 - If you have **diabetes**, keep your **blood sugar levels well-controlled**.

Speak to the healthcare team regarding **recommended vaccinations** to lower the risk of infections during recovery. Follow **hand hygiene** and wear a **face covering** when instructed.

Possible Complications

The healthcare team takes precautions to **minimize risks**, but complications can still occur. Your doctor can assess whether you have a **higher or lower risk** based on age, weight, smoking status, or underlying health conditions like **diabetes, heart disease, or lung disease**.

Some complications can be **serious or life-threatening**. If anything is unclear, ask your doctor. The **anaesthetist will discuss risks associated with anaesthesia**.

General Complications of Any Surgery

- **Bleeding** during or after the procedure, though **blood transfusions are rarely needed**. The use of a **tourniquet reduces this risk**.
- **Surgical site infection** (risk: **less than 1 in 100**). Showering is usually safe after **two days**, but **wounds should be kept dry and covered**. If you develop **a fever, pus, or redness**, contact the healthcare team. Antibiotics typically resolve infections, but severe cases may require **additional surgery**.
- **Allergic reactions** to **surgical materials, equipment, or medications**. Inform your doctor if you have known allergies.
- **Chest infection risk** is lower if you **stop smoking** and are free of **COVID-19 symptoms** for at least **seven weeks before surgery**.

Specific Complications of Elbow Arthroscopy

- **Bleeding into the joint** (risk: **1 in 100**) may cause **pain and swelling**, requiring another arthroscopy to flush out the joint.
- **Elbow joint infection** (risk: **less than 1 in 100**) may necessitate **antibiotics or further surgery**.
- **Complex regional pain syndrome (CRPS)** can lead to **severe pain, stiffness, and loss of function** in the **arm or hand**. Treatment includes **pain management and physiotherapy**, though recovery may take **months or years**.

- **Nerve damage** around the joint (risk: **1 in 100**) can cause **weakness, numbness, or pain**, which typically improves but may be permanent.
- **Radial nerve injury**, which may cause **weakness in finger-extending muscles**. This usually resolves over time, but **permanent damage is rare**.

Post-Surgery Expectations

Pain and Scarring

- **Pain management:** You will receive **pain medication**, which should be taken **as directed** to facilitate movement.
- **Scarring** is generally **minimal**, as arthroscopy incisions are **small and heal neatly**.

Recovery Timeline

Hospital Stay

After surgery, you will be taken to the **recovery area** before moving to the **ward**. The **surgeon or physiotherapist** will advise how long your **arm needs support**.

Most patients **go home the same day**, but some may need to **stay longer**. If you experience **any concerns at home**, contact the healthcare team for guidance.

Resuming Daily Activities

If you had **sedation or general anaesthesia**, follow these precautions for **at least 24 hours**:

- **A responsible adult must accompany you home** and stay with you.
- Stay **near a phone** in case of emergency.
- **Avoid driving, operating machinery, cooking, or engaging in hazardous activities** until you regain full coordination.
- **Do not sign legal documents or consume alcohol** during this period.

Wound care:

- Keep **wounds dry for 4-5 days**.
- Use **waterproof dressings** for bathing.
- Stitches are usually removed **after 1-2 weeks**.

Rehabilitation and Exercise

The **physiotherapist will provide exercises** to restore movement and strength in the **elbow joint**. Following these instructions **closely** will improve recovery outcomes. **Avoid contact sports or heavy lifting** until the healthcare team confirms it is safe. Full recovery may take **several weeks**.

Before starting exercise, consult your **healthcare team or GP**.

Driving and Mobility

Do not drive or cycle until you can **fully control your vehicle**, including in **emergency situations**. Confirm with your **insurance provider and healthcare team** before resuming driving.

Long-Term Outlook

Most patients experience **significant improvement** following elbow arthroscopy, though **pain relief and mobility restoration take time**. Symptoms may return over time, and **some patients require additional surgery**.

If the arthroscopy was **performed for diagnosis**, follow-up **clinic appointments** will be scheduled to discuss results and possible **future treatments**. If **biopsy samples** were taken, results are usually available within **three weeks**.

Summary

Elbow arthroscopy is a **minimally invasive procedure** that allows surgeons to **diagnose and treat** joint problems without making **large incisions**. This technique generally results in **less pain and faster recovery**.

Although surgery is **generally safe and effective**, complications can occur. Understanding these risks helps in making an **informed decision** and recognizing potential issues **early**.

Keep this document as a **reference** and consult your **healthcare team** if needed. Risk statistics are derived from **global studies** and databases. If you have concerns about risks specific to **your condition**, your **surgeon or doctor** can provide **personalized information** and discuss **alternative treatments** if necessary.

This document is intended for **informational purposes only** and should **not replace** professional medical advice from your healthcare provider.

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