

Elbow Fracture Surgery (adult)

What is an Elbow Fracture?

An **elbow fracture** occurs when one or more of the bones that form the **elbow joint** break.

Your surgeon has suggested an operation to treat your **broken elbow**. However, it is **your decision** whether to proceed with the operation.

This document provides information on the **benefits and risks** of surgery to help you make an **informed decision**.

If you have **any questions** not covered here, please ask your **surgeon** or the **healthcare team**.

Once all your questions have been answered and you feel ready, you will be asked to **sign the informed consent form**. This is the final step in the decision-making process.

However, you **can still change your mind** at any time.

How Does an Elbow Fracture Happen?

- **Most elbow fractures** occur from a **fall onto the elbow or hand**.
- These fractures can happen to **people of all ages**.
- The fracture may be:
 - A **small crack** in the bone.
 - **More severe**, with the **bone broken in multiple places**.
 - **Associated with a dislocation** of the elbow joint.
 - **Causing damage** to the surfaces of the joint.

What Are the Benefits of Surgery?

- Surgery aims to **hold the fractured bone in a good position** while it heals.
- This should **improve your elbow function**.
- If your **elbow joint is unstable**, surgery can **help keep it in place**.

Are There Any Alternatives to Surgery?

- Some **elbow fractures** heal well without surgery.
- You may need to:
 - Wear a **sling** for **one to two weeks**.
 - Take **painkillers** to **manage discomfort**.
 - **Use a cast** for a short time to help **control the pain**.

- If your elbow is dislocated, you may need:
 - A **manipulation** to **realign the bones**.
 - **Sedation or a general anaesthetic** for pain relief.

What Will Happen If I Decide Not to Have the Operation?

- You **may need a manipulation** followed by a **cast or sling**.
- The **physiotherapist** will help you **start moving your elbow** as soon as possible.
- If the **bones do not heal properly**, you may experience:
 - **Pain** in the elbow.
 - **Stiffness** and **reduced movement**.
- Surgery **generally provides better long-term results**, especially if performed **earlier**.



An elbow fracture

What Does the Operation Involve?

The **healthcare team** will perform **checks** to ensure you are having the **correct procedure on the correct side**.

You can help by **confirming your name** and **the operation** to your surgeon and the healthcare team.

Anaesthetic Options

- Various **anaesthetic techniques** are available.
- Your **anaesthetist** will discuss the **best option** for you.
- You may **receive local anaesthetic injections** to **help with pain** after the operation.

Reducing Infection Risk

- You may receive **antibiotics** during the operation to reduce the risk of **infection**.

Surgical Techniques

There are **different ways** to **fix a broken elbow**, depending on the type of fracture:

1. **Screws or plates** fixed to the bone with screws.
2. **Replacing fragmented bone** with an **artificial implant**.
3. **External fixator** – a **frame and pins** if the joint is **unstable**.

Your **surgeon** will discuss which **option or combination** of options is **best for you**.

Sometimes, your surgeon may need to **cut through the bone at the point of your elbow** to realign the bones. They will **join the bone back together** after securing the fracture.

Your **skin will be closed** with **stitches or clips**, and a **bandage or cast** will be placed on your **elbow**.



What Should I Do About My Medication?

- Inform your **healthcare team** about **all medications** you take.
- Follow their **instructions** regarding:
 - **Blood-thinning medications**
 - **Herbal and complementary remedies**
 - **Dietary supplements**
 - **Over-the-counter medications**
- **Anti-inflammatory painkillers** may prevent **proper fracture healing**, so avoid them **if possible**.

What Can I Do to Help Make the Operation a Success?

1. **Stop Smoking**
 - **Nicotine** prevents fractures from **healing properly**.
 - Stopping **reduces complication risks** and improves **long-term recovery**.
2. **Maintain a Healthy Weight**
 - Being **overweight increases the risk of complications**.
3. **Exercise Regularly**
 - Helps **prepare you for the operation**, aids **recovery**, and **improves long-term health**.
 - Always **consult** your **healthcare team or GP** before starting an exercise routine.
4. **Reduce Infection Risk**
 - Take the following steps:
 - **Bath or shower** before surgery (keep any **temporary cast dry**).

- **Stay warm** before and after the operation. Let the **healthcare team know** if you **feel cold**.
 - If you have **diabetes**, keep your **blood sugar levels under control**.
5. **Prevent Other Illnesses**
- Speak to the **healthcare team** about any **vaccinations** you might need to reduce the risk of **serious illness** while recovering.
 - In the hospital, **practice handwashing** and **wear a face covering** when asked.

Potential Complications of Elbow Fracture Surgery

What Complications Can Happen?

The **healthcare team** will take steps to **minimize complications**.

Risk factors for complications include:

- **Older age**
- **Obesity**
- **Smoking**
- **Diabetes**
- **Heart or lung disease**

Some complications can be **serious**.

Ask your **doctor** if anything is **unclear**.

Your **anaesthetist** will discuss the risks of **anaesthesia** with you.

General Complications of Any Operation

- **Bleeding** during or after surgery.
- **Infection at the surgical site (risk: 1 in 20)**
 - You can usually **shower after 2 days** but check with the healthcare team.
 - If you have a **cast, keep it dry**.
 - **Signs of infection:**
 - High temperature
 - Pus in the wound
 - Redness, soreness, or pain
 - Infections usually settle with **antibiotics**, but sometimes need **special dressings** or **another operation**.
 - **Do not take antibiotics** unless prescribed.
- **Allergic reaction** to surgical equipment, materials, or medications.
 - The **healthcare team is trained** to detect and treat these reactions.
 - Inform your **doctor** if you have any **known allergies**.
- **Difficulty passing urine** – A **catheter** may be needed for 1 to 2 days.
- **Chest infection** – The risk is lower if you have:
 - **Stopped smoking**
 - Been **Covid-19 symptom-free for at least 7 weeks** before surgery.

Specific Complications of This Operation

- **Nerve damage leading to numb skin or tender scars (risk: 1 in 10)**
 - This usually **improves but can be permanent**.

- **Damage to the ulnar nerve (risk: 1 in 5)**
 - The ulnar nerve **controls fine hand movements**.
 - This usually **recovers but can be permanent**.
- **Bone infection near screws or plates (risk: 1 in 100)**
 - Requires **antibiotics** or a **second operation**.
- **Bones moving out of position or failing to heal (risk: 1 in 20)**
 - May need **another surgery** to reposition the bones.
- **Bone forming in soft tissue (risk: 1 in 10)**
 - Can cause **stiffness in your elbow**.
- **Complex Regional Pain Syndrome (CRPS)**
 - **Severe pain, stiffness, and loss of function** in the arm, elbow, or hand.
 - Cause **unknown**, may require:
 - **Painkillers**
 - **Physiotherapy**
 - Symptoms may last **months or years**.
 - **Preventative measure:** Taking **vitamin C for 6 weeks** may reduce risk.
- **Developing arthritis in the elbow (risk: 1 in 25)**
 - Often **does not need treatment**.

Consequences of This Procedure

- **Pain** – The **healthcare team** will give you **pain relief**.
 - Take medication **as instructed** to **move around as advised**.
- **Scarring** – Your skin may develop **visible scars**.

Recovery After Elbow Fracture Surgery

How Soon Will I Recover?

In Hospital

- After the operation, you will be transferred to the **recovery area** and then to the **ward**.
- Keep your **wound dry** for **4 to 5 days** and use a **waterproof dressing** when showering or bathing.
- The **healthcare team** will inform you if you need **stitches removed** or **dressings changed**.
- Most patients **go home the same day**, but some may need to stay longer.
- If you have any concerns, **contact the healthcare team**. They can **reassure you** or address **any complications**.

Returning to Normal Activities

If you had **sedation** or a **general anaesthetic** and are **discharged the same day**:

- A **responsible adult** should take you home in a **car or taxi** and **stay with you for at least 24 hours**.
- Stay **near a telephone** in case of an emergency.
- **Do not:**
 - Drive or operate **machinery**
 - Do **dangerous activities** (e.g., cooking)
 - Sign **legal documents**
 - Drink **alcohol**
 - Until you have **fully recovered** feeling, movement, and coordination.

Rehabilitation and Healing

- **Keep your elbow raised** for **the first week** to reduce **swelling**.
- It is important to **move your elbow, hand, and fingers** to **prevent stiffness**.
- The fracture **usually heals in about a month**.
- If your surgeon used an **external fixator**, it will typically be removed in an **outpatient clinic**, usually **without the need for another anaesthetic**.
- **Physiotherapy** may be necessary if your elbow is still **stiff**.
- **Regular exercise** can help you return to **normal activities sooner**. Always consult your **healthcare team or GP** before starting exercises.
- **Do not drive or ride a bike** until you can fully **control your vehicle**, including in **emergency situations**. Always check with your **insurance policy** and **healthcare team**.

The Future

- Most people **recover well** and can return to **normal activities**.
- **Full recovery** can take **several months**.
- Some people may experience **permanent loss of some movement** in the elbow, but they can still perform **everyday activities**.
- **1 in 25 people** may develop **arthritis** in the elbow, but this **rarely requires treatment**.

Summary

- For certain **elbow fractures**, **surgery** is the **best way** to ensure proper bone healing.
- Surgery is **generally safe and effective**, but **complications** can occur.
- Being **aware of potential risks** will help you make an **informed decision** and detect any **early complications**.

Keep this document as a reference. It may help when discussing concerns with your **healthcare team**.

Some information, such as **risk and complication statistics**, is based on **global studies**.

Your **surgeon** or **doctor** can provide **personalized risk assessments** and discuss **alternative treatments**.

This document is for informational purposes only and does not replace medical advice from your healthcare team.