

Nursemaid's Elbow

About Nursemaid's Elbow

Nursemaid's elbow is a partial dislocation of the elbow, which occurs when the lower part of the arm (forearm) slips out of its normal position at the elbow joint. The medical term for this is called a "radial head subluxation."

A nursemaid's elbow injury usually doesn't cause swelling, but the child may complain that the elbow hurts, or cry when their arm is moved. A child will typically hold their arm close to the side, with the elbow slightly bent and the palm turned toward the body. If someone tries to straighten the elbow or turn the palm upward, the child will resist because of the pain.

While a child with nursemaid's elbow has some initial pain in the arm, the injury does not cause any long-term damage. At the doctor's office, or in the emergency room, a medical professional can slip the bone back into place, causing symptoms to go away quickly.

Causes

Nursemaid's elbow is a common condition in young children and generally affects children under age 5. The injury happens in younger children because their ligaments are loose and their bones are not yet fully formed. This makes it easier for some of the bones to slip in and out of place. As children get older, their ligaments tighten, bones enlarge and harden, and the risk of nursemaid's elbow decreases.

- **Jerking a child's arm.** Pulling a toddler along while walking or quickly grabbing his or her hand can jerk the arm, causing the radial head to slip. Remember to be gentle when taking a child by the hand.
- **Pulling a child up by the hands.** Pulling on hands or forearms can put stress on the elbows. Never pick up a toddler or infant by the hands or wrists. Lifting under the armpits is the safest way to lift a child.
- **Swinging a toddler by the arms.** Any type of swinging by holding the hands or wrists can put stress on the elbow joint and should be avoided.
- **Breaking a fall with the arm.** The natural response to falling is outstretching an arm for protection. The elbow can overextend during this action, resulting in a slip of the radial head.

Symptoms

- Immediate crying
- Complaints of elbow pain

- Refusing to use the arm that is injured
- Holding elbow slightly bent at the elbow
- Holding the lower part of the arm against the belly area
- Moving arm at shoulder but not elbow

Treatment

If you think your child has nursemaid's elbow:

- DO NOT move the child without first splinting the arm.
- DO NOT try to straighten the arm or change its position.

This injury should be treated by a pediatrician or other trained health care provider. Since elbow pain can also be due to a fracture, your pediatrician may need to consider this before the elbow is put back into place.

Once the elbow has been moved back in place, the child will generally feel immediate relief and within a few minutes should be using her arm normally without any discomfort. Occasionally, the doctor may recommend a sling for comfort for two or three days, particularly if several hours have passed before the injury is treated successfully. If the injury occurred several days earlier, a hard splint or cast may be used to protect the joint for one to two weeks.

Prevention

Nursemaid's elbow can be prevented by not pulling or lifting your child by the hands or wrist, or swinging the child by their arms. Instead, lift the child by grasping their body under the arms.

Resources

- www.healthychildren.org
- www.nlm.nih.gov
- www.kidsgrowth.com
- <http://kidshealth.org>

