

Elbow Arthroscopy

Arthroscopy is a procedure that orthopaedic surgeons use to inspect, diagnose, and repair problems inside a joint. The term literally means "to look within the joint." During elbow arthroscopy, your surgeon inserts a small camera, called an arthroscope, into your elbow joint. The camera displays pictures on a television screen, and your surgeon uses these images to guide miniature surgical instruments.

Because the arthroscope and surgical instruments are thin, your surgeon can use very small incisions (cuts), rather than the larger incision needed for open surgery. This results in less pain for patients, less joint stiffness, and often shortens the time it takes to recover and return to favorite activities.

When is Elbow Arthroscopy recommended?

Your doctor may recommend elbow arthroscopy if you have a painful condition that does not respond to nonsurgical treatment. Nonsurgical treatment includes rest, physical therapy, and medications or injections that can reduce inflammation. Inflammation is one of your body's normal reactions to injury or disease. In an injured or diseased elbow joint, inflammation causes swelling, pain, and stiffness.

Injury, overuse, and age-related wear and tear are responsible for most elbow problems. Elbow arthroscopy may relieve painful symptoms of many problems that damage the cartilage surfaces and other soft tissues surrounding the joint. Elbow arthroscopy may also be recommended to remove loose pieces of bone and cartilage, or release scar tissue that is blocking motion.

Common arthroscopic procedures include:

- Treatment of tennis elbow (lateral epicondylitis)
- Removal of loose bodies (loose cartilage and bone fragments)
- Release of scar tissue to improve range of motion
- Treatment of osteoarthritis (wear and tear arthritis)
- Treatment of rheumatoid arthritis (inflammatory arthritis)
- Treatment of osteochondritis dissecans (activity related damage to the capitellum portion of the humerus seen in throwers or gymnasts)

What does planning for surgery involve?

Evaluations and Tests

Blood tests, an electrocardiogram, or chest x-ray may be needed before your surgery. These are done to make sure that you do not have any medical problems that need to be addressed before your surgery.

If you have certain health risks, a more extensive evaluation may be necessary before your surgery. Be sure to inform your orthopaedic surgeon of any medications or supplements that you take. You may need to stop taking some of these prior to surgery.

If you are generally healthy, your arthroscopy will most likely be performed as a day care surgery or a single night stay.

Admissions Instructions

The hospital or day care unit will contact you ahead of time to provide specific details about your procedure. Make sure to follow the instructions on when to arrive and especially on when to stop eating or drinking prior to your surgery.

Anesthesia

Elbow arthroscopy is usually performed using general anesthesia, meaning you are put to sleep. If necessary for pain control, a regional anesthetic may be provided in the recovery room after your surgeon completes the nerve examination.

Procedure

Once in the operating room, you will most likely be given general anesthesia, as well as intravenous antibiotics. Antibiotics are typically given before surgery to lessen the risk of infection after surgery.

A tourniquet is applied to your upper arm which is then placed in an arm holder to keep it in position during the procedure. Your surgeon will first fill the elbow joint with fluid. The fluid helps your surgeon more clearly see the structures of your elbow through the camera on the arthroscope. This lessens the risk of injury to the blood vessels and nerves surrounding your elbow joint. Your surgeon will make several small incisions to introduce the arthroscope and small instruments into the joint. If indicated, the entire joint will be evaluated, which may require a total of five or six very small arthroscopy incisions.

The arthroscopy incisions are usually stitched or covered with skin tapes at the end of the surgery. An absorbent dressing is applied to the elbow. Depending upon the procedure, your surgeon will place either an additional soft dressing that will allow movement or a plaster splint that will restrict movement and better protect the elbow.

What is the recovery from surgery like?

Postoperative

After surgery, you will stay in the surgical care unit for a few hours. Nurses will monitor your responsiveness and provide pain medication, if needed. You will be provided discharge instructions that cover medications, need for ice and elevation, as well dressing care. You will need someone to drive you home and stay with you for at least the first night.

At Home

Although recovery from arthroscopy is often faster than recovery from open surgery, it may still take weeks for your elbow joint to completely recover. You can expect some pain and discomfort for at least a week after surgery. If you have had a more extensive surgery, however, it may take several weeks before your pain subsides. It is important to ice and elevate your elbow regularly for 48 hours after surgery. This will reduce the risk of severe swelling and help to relieve pain. When elevating your arm, whether you lie flat or recline, make sure your elbow is resting higher than your heart and your hand is positioned higher than your elbow. Depending on the type of surgery performed, your doctor may have specific instructions for longer periods of ice and elevation.

You will most likely be encouraged to move your fingers and wrist frequently to help stimulate circulation and minimize swelling. Your doctor may recommend early range-of-motion exercises to prevent joint stiffness. When you can start these gentle exercises, as well as return to daily activities, will depend on the type of surgery performed.

Dressing care will depend on the type of surgery performed and the preferences of your doctor. In most cases, the operative dressing and/or splint is removed 2 to 3 days after surgery. During this time, your dressing must be left intact and kept dry. In some instances, you may be instructed to keep the dressing in place until your first postoperative clinic visit with your doctor.

Rehabilitation

Rehabilitation plays an important role in getting you back to your daily activities. An exercise program will help you regain elbow and forearm motion and strength. Your surgeon will develop a rehabilitation plan based on the surgical procedures you required. Return to driving, basic activities of daily living, and return to work will depend on the type of surgery you required and should be discussed with your doctor prior to surgery.

Complications

Most patients do not experience complications from elbow arthroscopy. As with any surgery, however, there are some risks. These are usually minor and treatable and not likely to affect your final outcome. Potential problems with elbow arthroscopy include infection, excessive bleeding, blood clots, and damage to blood vessels or nerves.

Your doctor will discuss the potential risks and benefits of elbow arthroscopy with you prior to surgery.

Long-Term Outcomes

Because patients have varied elbow conditions, complete recovery time is different for everyone. If you have had a minor repair, you may not need a splint and your range of motion and function may return after a short period of rehabilitation. You may be able to return to work or school within a few days of your procedure. It takes longer to recover from more complicated procedures. Although it can be a slow process, following your surgeon's guidelines and rehabilitation plan is vital to a successful outcome.