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Elbow replacement

Elbow replacement is surgery to replace the elbow joint with artificial joint parts (prosthetics).

Description

The elbow joint connects three bones:

- The humerus in the upper arm
- The ulna and radius in the lower arm (forearm)

The artificial elbow joint has two or three stems made of high-quality metal. A metal and plastic hinge joins the stems together and allows the artificial joint to bend. Artificial joints come in different sizes to fit people of different sizes.

The surgery is done in the following way:

- You'll receive general anesthesia. This means you'll be asleep and unable to feel pain. Or, you'll receive regional anesthesia (spinal and epidural) to numb your arm.
- A cut (incision) is made on the back of your elbow so that the surgeon can view your elbow joint.
- The damaged tissue and parts of the arm bones that make up the elbow joint are removed.
- A tool is used to make a hole in the center of the arm bones to anchor the artificial joint in place.
- The ends of the artificial joint are usually glued in place into each bone. They can be connected with a hinge.
- The tissue around the new joint is repaired.

The wound is closed with stitches, and a bandage is applied. Your arm may be placed in a splint to keep it stable.

Why the Procedure is Performed

Elbow replacement surgery is usually done if the elbow joint is badly damaged and you have pain or cannot use your arm. Some causes of damage are:

- Osteoarthritis
- Poor outcome from past elbow surgery
- Rheumatoid arthritis
- Badly broken bone in the upper or lower arm near the elbow

- Badly damaged or torn tissues in the elbow
- Tumor in or around the elbow
- Stiff elbow

Risks

Risks of anesthesia and surgery in general include:

- Reactions to medicines, breathing problems
- Bleeding, blood clots, infection

Risks of this procedure include:

- Blood vessel damage during surgery
- Bone break during surgery
- Dislocation of the artificial joint
- Loosening of the artificial joint over time
- Nerve damage during surgery

Before the Procedure

Tell your surgeon or nurse if:

- You are or could be pregnant
- You are taking any medicines, including medicines, supplements, or herbs you bought without a prescription

During the week before your surgery:

- You may be asked to temporarily stop taking medicines that keep your blood from clotting. These medicines are called blood thinners. This includes over-the-counter medicines and supplements such as aspirin, ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin), naproxen (Aleve, Naprosyn), and vitamin E. Many prescription medicines are also blood thinners.
- Ask your surgeon which medicines you should still take on the day of surgery.

On the day of your surgery:

- Follow instructions about when to stop eating and drinking.
- Take the medicines your surgeon told you to take with a small sip of water.
- Arrive at the hospital on time.

After the Procedure

You may need to stay in the hospital for up to 1 to 2 days. After you go home, follow instructions on how to care for your wound and elbow.

Physical therapy will be needed to help you gain strength and use of your arm. It will start with gentle flexing exercises. People who have a splint usually start therapy a few weeks later than those who do not have a splint.

Some people can start to use their new elbow as soon as 12 weeks after surgery. Complete recovery can take up to a year. There will be limits to how much weight you can lift. Lifting too heavy of a load can break the replacement elbow or loosen the parts. Talk to your surgeon about your limitations. Your surgeon may give you a weight limit for lifting with that arm.

It is important to follow-up with your surgeon regularly to check how your replacement is doing. Be sure to go to all your appointments.

Outlook (Prognosis)

Elbow replacement surgery eases pain for most people. It can also increase the range of motion of your elbow joint. A second elbow replacement surgery is usually not as successful as the first one.

Alternative Names

Total elbow arthroplasty; Endoprosthetic elbow replacement; Arthritis - elbow arthroplasty; Osteoarthritis - elbow arthroplasty; Degenerative arthritis - elbow arthroplasty; DJD - elbow arthroplasty

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Updated by: C. Benjamin Ma, MD, Professor, Chief, Sports Medicine and Shoulder Service, UCSF Department of Orthopaedic Surgery, San Francisco, CA. Also reviewed by David C. Dugdale, MD, Medical Director, Brenda Conaway, Editorial Director, and the A.D.A.M. Editorial team.

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