

Olecranon bursitis

What is Olecranon bursitis?

A bursa is a fluid filled sac that stops soft tissues such as tendons, ligaments and skin rubbing on the bone next to them. Bursitis is inflammation of the bursa which can be caused by direct impact or by soft tissue tightness over the bursa causing repeated irritation. Olecranon bursitis is an irritation of the bursa over the point of the elbow.



What causes Olecranon bursitis?

It is usually caused by repeated injury or irritation to the bursa by activities such as simply leaning on the elbow i.e. when reading or working at a desk which is why it is sometimes called 'student's elbow'. It can also be caused by a one off injury such as falling onto hard ground during sport.

Other causes include arthritis which can cause inflammation in many structures including the bursa, an infection from a small cut, and sometimes there is no apparent reason to cause bursitis.

What are the symptoms?

The most obvious symptom is a large, well defined swelling over the point of the elbow similar to that on the picture shown. These are often painless but can become uncomfortable if the irritating activity that caused it continues. They may also be hot and red if there is an infection present or if they are caused by arthritis.

How is Olecranon bursitis diagnosed?

It is often simple to diagnose Olecranon bursitis without any special test although your doctor may wish to do blood tests if they feel it is caused by infection, arthritis or gout. Occasionally your GP may want to take some of the fluid out of the bursa with a needle to test for infection to ensure they can give the correct treatment, although this is unlikely. They may also wish to perform an x-ray where there has been an injury to ensure there is no small fracture or bone chip in the elbow.

What is the treatment for Olecranon bursitis?

Olecranon bursitis will often settle with no treatment other than ensuring the bursa is protected from whatever caused the irritation in the first place. The 'PRICE' treatment protocol is recommended:

- Protection:** Avoid leaning on elbow or use padding to stop direct pressure to the bursa.
- Rest:** Stop activities that may lead to irritation such as continuous elbow bending.
- Ice:** Use an ice pack wrapped in a damp tea-towel for 12 minutes up to 3 times a day for the first 3 days.
- Compression:** Using a compression bandage may help reduce the inflammation.
- Elevation:** Elevating the arm when resting may help reduce the inflammation.

Anti-inflammatory medications: Your GP may prescribe some anti-inflammatory medications such as ibuprofen to help settle the inflammation.

Injection: Steroid injections may help as they are a strong anti-inflammatory.

Antibiotics: These will be prescribed if it is thought your bursitis is caused by infection.

Aspiration: This means using a needle and syringe to draw out the fluid from the bursa. This may be attempted but is avoided if possible as it can lead to infection. Sometimes the bursa will refill with fluid after this has been done.

Surgery: If you get recurrent painful Olecranon bursitis then it may be necessary to have the bursa removed surgically but this is a last resort and is quite rare.

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