

Information about

Olecranon Bursitis



What is the olecranon bursa?

The olecranon is the top part of the ulna bone. It is the bony part of the back of the elbow - the bit that you lean on. A bursa is a small sac that contains a small amount of fluid. The fluid is similar to the fluid in joints (synovial fluid). There are several bursae in the body including one just over the olecranon. Bursae help to make movement smooth between bones which 'stick out' and the overlying skin.

What is olecranon bursitis?

Bursitis means inflammation of a bursa. The bursa at the back of the elbow over the olecranon is the most common bursa to become inflamed. Inflammation causes swelling and extra fluid to be made.

Sometimes the bursitis can become infected and form an abscess. You may have repeated pressure caused by regularly leaning on the elbow can cause bursitis. It can also be caused by a one-off injury such as a fall onto the elbow. Infection can occur if you have a cut or break in the skin nearby. Sometimes we cannot identify a reason.

What are the symptoms of olecranon bursitis?

You cannot normally feel or see a bursa. If the olecranon bursa is inflamed then it causes a thickness and swelling over the back of the elbow. The bursa may also fill with fluid and it then looks like a small soft ball - a bit like a cyst. Most cases (those not infected or associated with arthritis) are painless, or are only mildly painful. The movement of the elbow joint is not affected. If the bursa is infected ('septic' olecranon bursitis) then you will usually develop pain, redness and tenderness behind the elbow. A bursitis associated with arthritis may not be painful itself, but you will have other symptoms related to the arthritis such as joint pains.

What are the treatment options?

It is usually best to leave the bursitis alone. A small painless thickening or swelling is common. It often clears up by itself. If a small amount of fluid remains once the inflammation has gone then this can be left alone. However, a large collection of fluid may be unsightly.

We normally only offer treatment if they are significantly troublesome. This would be if they kept getting infected or are very painful.

The options for treatment are:

- **Avoiding leaning on the elbow** wherever possible.
- **Anti-inflammatory medication** may be prescribed to reduce inflammation and swelling.
- **Aspiration (draining the fluid with a needle)** is not usually recommended as this can introduce infection and the fluid often comes back.
- **Surgery** to remove the bursa is an option in rare cases where it does not improve and it causes longer term symptoms of discomfort.

What are the risks from surgery?

- You will have a permanent scar.
- The swelling may recur.
- There might be a leak of fluid from the wound that lasts several weeks and requires regular dressings from a nurse.
- Infection, stiffness and chronic pain from the joint may occur.

What do I do now?

We do not routinely provide a hospital appointment.

After reading this leaflet if you think that you do not need treatment at the moment you do not need to take any further action.

You can get advice from us directly in the future in case your symptoms worsen.

Please contact us on the number provided on the covering letter if you wish to discuss further.