

# Pain Insights

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*Courtesy of Joe De Santi, M.D.*

## ELBOW PAIN

While it is true the “humerus” and “funny bone” are structures around the elbow, there’s nothing laughable about pain caused by either of these structures when inflamed or injured. The humerus is the long bone of the upper arm which makes the elbow joint with the radius and ulna of the lower forearm. This is a hinge-joint and like most door hinges will only open so far in one direction. It is the olecranon (point of the elbow) portion of the ulna which glides over the humerus and locks the arm in a straight position when fully extended. The ability to rotate the lower forearm involves movement of the radius bone pivoting over the fixed ulna.

The funny bone is actually a misnomer since there is actually no bone structure involved. The ulnar nerve which passes through a groove in the inner portion of the ulna is the actual structure. When struck acutely or chronically irritated it can be a source of much discomfort. The referred pain down the arm to the hand is characteristic of the sensory component. Intrinsic muscular weakness to the hand itself is characteristic of the muscular component. Many times simple splinting and local injection of an anti-inflammatory are curative, as well as modification of activity to avoid chronic irritation. If this doesn’t work the nerve is occasionally relocated surgically to avoid the problem.

Tennis and golfer’s elbow are two common repetitive motion injuries seen in players of these sports. Other activities like painting and hoeing a garden can also cause these injuries. Typically there is intense soreness and point tenderness to the outer and inner aspects of the elbow respectively. Extending or flexing the wrist respectively will often precipitate the pain. Ice or heat, an oral anti-inflammatory and splinting at the wrist will often resolve the problem. Occasionally injection is required and in rare cases surgery.

Olecranon bursitis is another condition commonly seen in those that lean on the point of the elbow frequently or strike this area accidentally. Some chronic illnesses like gout and rheumatoid arthritis can also involve this bursa. The bursa (which is a sac-like structure) fills with fluid to protect the olecranon from repeat injury. This unsightly enlargement can restrict bending of the elbow and can be quite painful. Treatment usually involves removing the fluid, icing, an oral anti-inflammatory and occasionally splinting of the elbow to prevent bending for a short time.