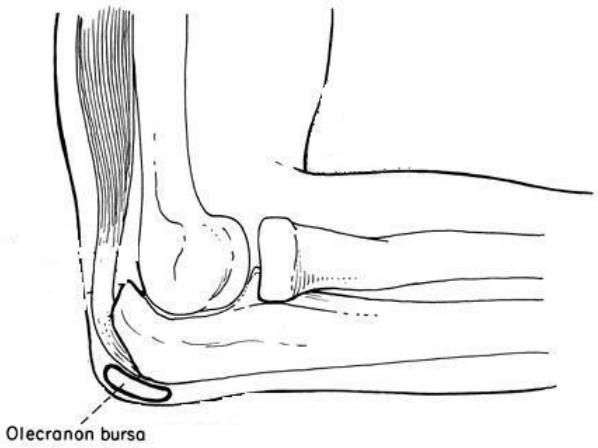
Olecranon Bursitis

A bursa functions like a water balloon to reduce friction and wear of the soft tissues over bone. The olecranon bursa is a bursa between the back of the elbow (olecranon) and the overlying skin. This bursa allows the skin to glide easily and without friction over the back of the elbow. Olecranon bursitis is characterized by inflammation and pain of this bursa.



Frequent Signs and Symptoms

- Pain, tenderness, swelling, warmth, or redness over the back of the elbow at the olecranon bursa
- Limited movement in the affected area, occasionally with radiation of pain into adjacent areas
- Occasionally, severe pain with movement of the affected elbow
- Crepitation (a crackling sound) when the bursa is moved or touched
- Often, painless swelling of the bursa
- Fever (when infected)

Etiology (Causes)

- Usually a sudden direct trauma or repetitive pressure on the back of the elbow
- Less commonly, overuse or strenuous, unaccustomed exercise of the elbow

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Risk Factors

- Sports that require bending or landing on the elbow, such as football, especially on artificial turf, or volleyball
- Vigorous or repetitive sport training or sudden increase or change in activity level (weekend warriors)
- Improper warm-up or overstretching
- Poor technique
- Playing on artificial turf

Prevention

- Avoid injuries or overuse of muscles whenever possible.
- Appropriately warm up and cool down.
- Maintain appropriate conditioning:
    - Elbow flexibility
    - Muscle strength and endurance
    - Cardiovascular fitness
- Use proper technique and wear protective equipment, including elbow pads.

Outcomes

This condition improves within weeks to months if treated appropriately with conservative treatment and resting of the affected area.

Potential Complications

- Prolonged healing time if not appropriately treated or if not given adequate time to heal
- Frequent recurrence of symptoms resulting in a chronic problem
- Joint stiffness with permanent limitation of the affected joint's mobility
- Infection of bursa
- Chronic inflammation or scarring of bursa

Treatment Considerations

Initial treatment occasionally consists of medication and ice to relieve the pain, stretching and strengthening exercises (particularly the biceps and triceps muscles), and modification of the activity that initially caused the problem. Often an elbow pad or brace may be recommended to protect the bursa and to reduce repeated irritation of the bursa while the inflammation settles down. These all can be carried out at home, although referral to a physical therapist or athletic trainer for further evaluation and treatment may be helpful. An elastic bandage may be used to help reduce swelling. If symptoms persist or recur, withdrawing fluid from the bursa, with or without injection of cortisone, may be needed. Bursae that persist despite conservative treatment, recurrent bursae, and infected bursae may require surgical excision (removal).

Possible Medications

- Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory medications, such as aspirin and ibuprofen (do not take within 7 days before surgery), or other minor pain relievers, such as acetaminophen, are occasionally recommended. Take these as directed by your physician. Contact your physician immediately if any bleeding, stomach upset, or signs of an allergic reaction occur.
- Pain relievers are usually not prescribed for this condition. If your physician does prescribe pain medications, use only as directed and only as much as you need.
- Cortisone injections into the bursa reduce inflammation and may be administered, although this is not usually recommended as a means to return to sports.
- Antibiotics may be prescribed if the bursa is infected or to prevent infection after surgery.

Modalities (Heat and Cold)

- Cold is used to relieve pain and reduce inflammation for acute and chronic cases. Cold should be applied for 15 to 20 minutes every 2 to 3 hours for inflammation and pain and immediately after any activity that aggravates your symptoms. Use ice packs or an ice massage.
- Heat may be used before performing stretching and strengthening activities prescribed by your physician, physical therapist, or athletic trainer. Use a heat pack or a warm soak.

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