Elbow Stiffness and Elbow Arthritis

Elbow stiffness can be caused by a variety of conditions, including osteoarthritis, rheumatoid arthritis, or following a traumatic injury. These conditions result in a stiff elbow that is painful to move.

How does this happen?

The most common cause of elbow stiffness is a traumatic injury to the elbow. This includes elbow fractures, dislocations, and ligament tears. Following an injury, the elbow hurts. It feels better not to move it, and sometimes it feels better in a sling. When the elbow is held in one position for several weeks, it becomes stiff. Stiffness can also result from arthritis, although this is less common.

How will we know that this is your problem?

The diagnosis of elbow stiffness is made by a combination of history of injury and exam of the elbow that reveals decreased range of motion. Your physician may also obtain X-rays, CT scan, and MRI to gain additional information.

How can this be treated?

The initial treatment for elbow stiffness involves physical therapy and home exercises for stretching the elbow to improve range of motion. Bracing may be effective to passively stretch the elbow. Anti-inflammatory medications (NSAID's) can be prescribed for pain. When non-operative treatment fails to provide relief, surgery may be an option. Surgery may be performed with a scope to remove bone spurs and release the elbow joint to improve motion. When severe arthritis is present, an elbow replacement may offer the best chance of decreasing pain and improving function.

Drs. Michael O'Brien and Felix H. (Buddy) Savoie perform surgery for elbow stiffness and elbow arthritis. Drs. O'Brien and Savoie are fellowship-trained in Shoulder and Elbow Reconstruction. They offer a wide range of surgical reconstruction, including arthroscopy and elbow replacements. Drs. O’Brien and Savoie have had excellent success performing arthroscopic elbow surgery to decrease pain, improve range of motion and function, and help patients get back to work and the activities they enjoy (see below for recent publications).

The Tulane Institute of Sports Medicine offers on-site X-Ray and MRI, as well as its own Physical Therapy department with licensed physical therapists, in order to ease your visit and speed your recovery.