

Little League Elbow

Little League elbow is a common, but painful injury that occurs in children and teenagers. Little League elbow is an overuse growth plate injury of the elbow. Most commonly it affects the group of muscles that flex the wrist and rotate the forearm palm down attach at the growth plate. This injury occurs when children and teenagers are involved in a sport or activity that requires repetitive throwing motions.

The growth plate in the elbow is vulnerable to injury because it is made up of growth cartilage, a soft substance that is not as strong as bone, muscle or tendon. With repetitive throwing, and not enough rest between throwing activities, the growth cartilage weakens, begins to develop very small cracks and may actually pull apart from the arm bone. The most prevalent symptom of Little League elbow is pain. The pain may occur abruptly after one hard throw or it may gradually occur during the course of the season. There may also be swelling, redness, and warmth over the elbow.

Two parts of the throwing motion can cause stress on the growth plate:

- The first being the acceleration phase. During this phase, there is a pulling, or traction force, applied to the growth plate on the elbow.
- The second is the point when the ball is released. During this phase, there is a powerful inward and downward snap of the wrist.

Treatment begins by first diagnosing the problem. After an examination, an x-ray may be ordered to confirm the diagnosis or to exclude other problems. After the diagnosis, treatment depends on the extent of the growth plate injury. Little League elbow does not usually cause permanent damage. If caught early and treated properly, Little League elbow will heal completely, and there will be no long-term effects to the growth plate. In the early phases, Little League elbow can be treated with rest, icing, anti-inflammatory drugs and physical therapy (see below for specifics). If the injury is more severe, or if there is significant separation of the growth plate from the bone, casting may be necessary.

-Rest – For Little League elbow, the period of nonthrowing may take four to six weeks to allow proper healing. Sometimes, if this sports injury is minor and caught early, an athlete will be allowed to bat or play an infield position, such as first base. Once the healing process is complete, the athlete will be allowed to return to throwing gradually over a 2 to 3 week period.

-Ice – The most optimal time to ice is immediately after a workout. The area should be iced until it is numb, usually about 10 to 15 minutes at a time. The icing should be repeated several times a day.

-Anti-inflammatory Drugs – Anti-inflammatory medicine should be taken for 10 to 14 days to allow the medicine to build up to therapeutic levels in the body. Taking medicine infrequently allows the medicine levels to drop, which decreases its effectiveness.

-Physical Therapy – Physical therapy may be ordered. The therapist will evaluate the athlete and provide instructions in proper exercises to assist with range of motion and strengthening. They will also analyze the throwing mechanics and develop a safe functional throwing progression.

When Little League elbow is suspected or an injury occurs, the problem is best diagnosed by a Pediatric Orthopaedist. Please call our office at 404-321-9900 to set up an appointment if your child experiences pain or discomfort in their elbow.



404-321-9900