

# Nursemaid's Elbow (Pulled Elbow)

Nursemaid's elbow is a partial dislocation of one of the forearm bones at the elbow. It is a common injury in toddlers, often caused by an adult's pulling or swinging the child by the arms. Usually, nursemaid's elbow is easily treated by the doctor's putting the dislocated bone back in place.

## What is nursemaid's elbow?

Nursemaid's elbow is a partial dislocation of the "radial head," which is one of the bones of the elbow. Because this bone is not fully developed in toddlers, it is easy for one of the elbow ligaments to slip over the end of the bone.

Nursemaid's elbow is not a serious injury, and it is relatively easy to correct. Because the joint is so flexible in young children, the ligament slips back into place easily. However, the injury can easily happen again, so you must be careful to avoid pulling or tugging on your child's arm.

## What does it look like?

- Your child has pain and difficulty moving his or her arm.
- Often, he or she starts crying immediately after being lifted or pulled by the arm.
- Your child refuses to move the arm or to let you move it. He or she usually holds the arm in a bent position in front of the body, as if it were in a sling.
- Your child may otherwise be happy and playful—he or she just refuses to move the injured arm.

## What causes nursemaid's elbow?

- Pulling or jerking on your toddler's arm, for example, pulling your child up a step or swinging him or her by the arms.
- In about one half of children with nursemaid's elbow, the exact cause of the injury is unknown.
- Nursemaid's elbow most often occurs in toddlers ages 1 to 3 years. It rarely happens after age 5 because the skeleton has matured.
- If your child has had this type of elbow injury in the past, it is not uncommon for it to happen again.

## What are some possible complications of nursemaid's elbow?

As long as the injury is recognized and treated properly, complications are rare.

## Can nursemaid's elbow be prevented?

*Yes.* Do not pull on your baby's or toddler's arms.

- Don't pull him or her by the outstretched arms up a step or curb or out of a car seat.
- Don't swing your child by the arms.
- Don't jerk on your child's arms, especially when you are angry. (Nursemaid's elbow is sometimes called "temper tantrum elbow" because the injury sometimes happens when the child is having a tantrum.)

The proper way to lift an infant or toddler is under the armpits or by the upper arms, never by the hand or wrist.

## How is nursemaid's elbow treated?

- The doctor can usually move the elbow joint back into proper position. This can be done in the office or emergency room, usually with no need for anesthetic.
- *Do not* try to move the elbow yourself.
- It may take more than one try before the elbow moves back into place.
- You may hear a "pop" or "click" as the elbow moves back into place.
- Your child will likely be upset and cry while the doctor is manipulating the elbow. Crying usually stops not long after the elbow position is returned to normal.
- Your child will probably be able to use the arm soon after treatment. However, this may take a while if he or she is afraid to move the arm.

## When should I call your office?

Call our office if your child develops new or repeated symptoms of nursemaid's elbow (refusal to move the arm, crying after being pulled or jerked by the arm).