What is a pulled elbow?
A pulled elbow (sometimes called “nursemaid’s elbow”) is a common elbow injury seen in young children. The injury causes a subluxation of one of the bones (the radius) at the elbow joint. Subluxation means the bone has slid out of proper position. The nursemaid’s elbow injury usually occurs in children age 5 or younger.

What causes a pulled elbow?
A pulled elbow can be caused in a number of ways, but the classic mechanism is a sudden pull on a young child’s arm. For example, an adult trying to prevent a child from falling or running across a road, may suddenly pull the child by the hand. If the arm is in a certain position, the radial head is susceptible to subluxation. In many cases (up to 50%) there is no “classic” story of a pull and in some cases a “pulled elbow” can be the result of a fall.

What are the symptoms of a pulled elbow?
Children who sustain a radial head subluxation have sudden pain around the elbow joint. The children often hold their arm slightly bent and held against their body and do not wish to bend or straighten their elbow or turn their hand over (palm side up). There is usually minimal or no swelling or bruising. If your child’s elbow is swollen or bruised, or if the examination findings or story of the injury are not typical of a pulled elbow, the doctor will consider other types of elbow injuries (such as a fracture) and will probably perform an xray.

What is the Treatment of a pulled elbow?
The subluxed radial head can usually be placed back into position by your doctor. Sometimes pain relief is used for comfort, but often this is not necessary. When the radial head is repositioned your doctor can usually feel it ‘pop’ back into position. Children will usually feel immediate improvement in pain and will usually start using their arm normally again within 5-10 minutes.

If the injury is treated quickly, and if this is the first radial head subluxation in the child, then usually immobilisation is not necessary. In some cases, a splint or sling may be applied for about a week.
How can I prevent a pulled elbow?

Try not to lift your children by the end of one arm as sudden pulls of the hand or wrist can cause a radial head subluxation (pulled elbow) in young children. DO NOT attempt to put the elbow back in place yourself – this can cause harm if not done properly or if your child has a different sort of injury to a pulled elbow (e.g., the elbow is fractured).

When should you return to hospital?

Unfortunately, once your child has had a pulled elbow, they are at an increased risk of it happening again. Return to your doctor or hospital if:

• Your child sustains an injury to their elbow, particularly if they are holding it in the typical position described earlier.
• Remember to alert your doctor that your child has previously suffered from a pulled elbow.

Important Facts about Pulled Elbow

A pulled elbow (sometimes called “nursemaid’s elbow”) is a common elbow injury seen in young children.

• A pulled elbow can usually be “popped” back into place by a doctor, using a simple manoeuvre.
• Children who have had a pulled elbow are at an increased risk of it happening again
• Try not to suddenly pull on your child’s wrist or arm as this may result in a pulled elbow.

Seeking help

In a medical emergency go to the nearest hospital emergency department or call an ambulance (dial 000).

See your local doctor or health care professional if you:

• have pain that does not improve with pain killers
• have increased severe joint swelling
• have increased stiffness feel generally unwell with a fever
• cannot function at home.

For health advice from a Registered Nurse you can call 13 HEALTH (13 43 25 84)

13 HEALTH provides access to interpreting services for callers not confident with English.

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