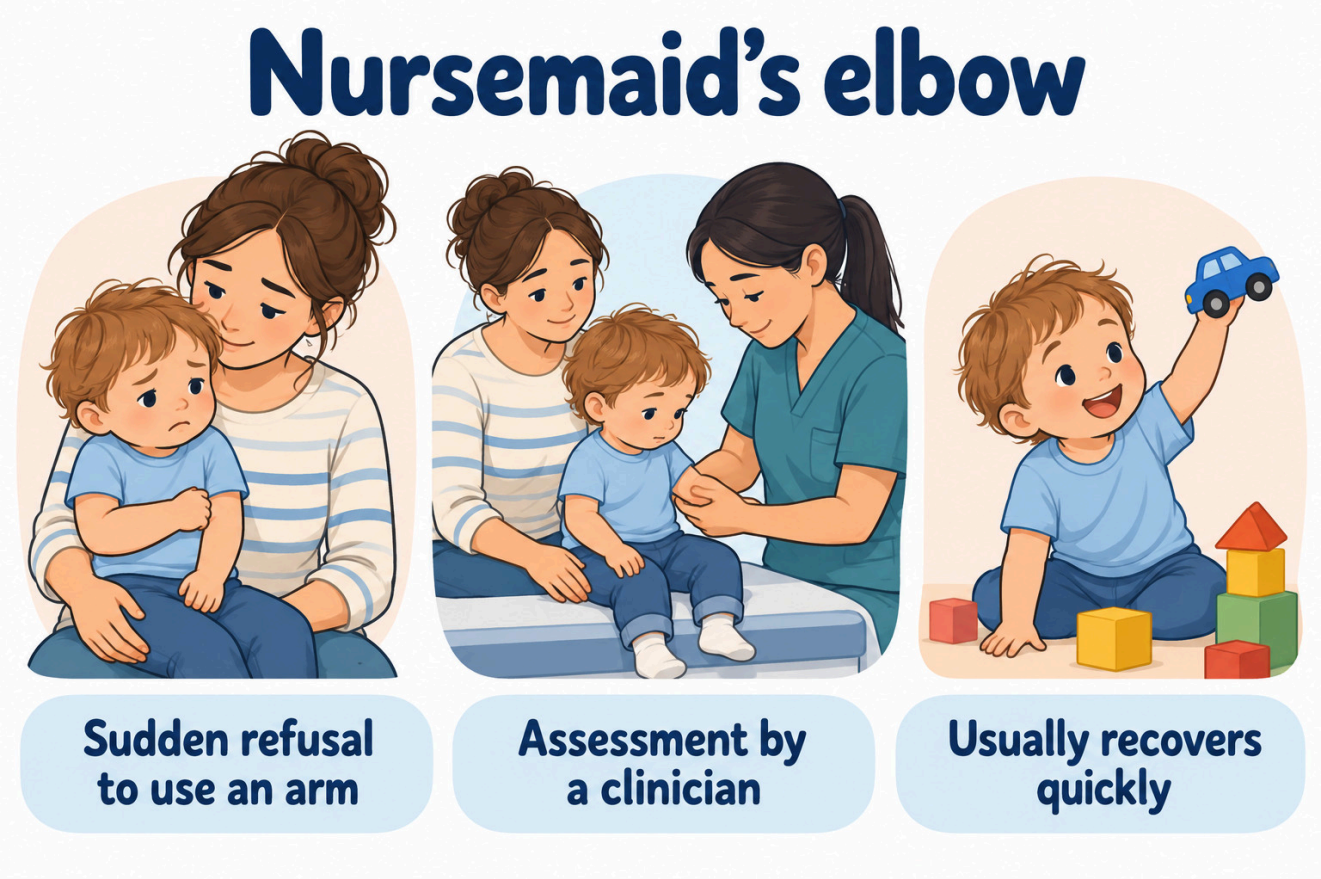
Radial Head Subluxation

Information for children, parents and carers

Radial Head Subluxation

A guide to symptoms, treatment and recovery



Understanding the condition

Radial head subluxation, often called nursemaid's elbow or pulled elbow, is a common injury in young children, especially ages 1-5. A sudden pull on the arm can cause pain and refusal to use it.

Supporting your child

A trained clinician should assess and treat the arm. Children often recover quickly after treatment. Avoid lifting, pulling or swinging a child by the hands or wrists to reduce the chance of it happening again.

Symptoms and assessment

Understanding the cause and when to seek help

How can it happen?

A sudden pull on the hand or wrist, lifting a child by one arm, swinging by the hands, or a pull while preventing a fall can trigger it. Occasionally it follows an awkward roll during sleep.

What might you notice?

Sudden crying, elbow pain and refusal to move the arm. The child may hold it close to the body with the elbow slightly bent. Swelling and bruising are usually absent, but another injury must be considered if present.

Why young children are affected

Young children’s ligaments are still developing, making pulled elbow easier to trigger. It can happen accidentally, sometimes after a relatively gentle pull.

What happens at assessment?

The clinician asks what happened and examines the arm, elbow, movement and comfort. X-rays are not normally needed unless the story is unclear or a fracture or other injury is suspected.

Get the arm checked

A child who suddenly stops using an arm needs assessment. Swelling, bruising, visible deformity, a fall or direct injury, or unusual distress should be reported to the healthcare professional.

Key message

A trained clinician should assess and treat the arm. Children often recover quickly after treatment. Avoid lifting, pulling or swinging a child by the hands or wrists to reduce the chance of it happening again.

Treatment and daily care

Activity guided by your child's healthcare team

Before starting activity

This page shows care and prevention, not home exercises. A trained healthcare professional should perform any treatment manoeuvre; do not attempt reduction yourself.



Activity guidance

Treatment: a trained clinician performs the reduction if appropriate.
Recovery: normal arm use usually returns soon after treatment.
Handling: lift under the arms, not by the hands or wrists.
Prevention: avoid sudden pulling and arm-swinging games.

Important precautions

Return for reassessment if your child still will not use the arm after 20-30 minutes following treatment, or if swelling, bruising, deformity, significant distress or repeated episodes occur.

Treatment and next steps

Caring for your child and finding support

Treatment and early recovery

A trained clinician uses a quick, gentle manoeuvre to restore the elbow's position. Most children begin using the arm within minutes; some take 10-20 minutes. If recovery does not follow, further assessment is needed.

After treatment at home

Once recovery is confirmed, your child can usually use the arm normally and does not need a sling. Mild discomfort may settle quickly. Follow the clinician's discharge instructions and seek review if arm use does not return.

Preventing another episode

Lift under the arms instead of by hands or wrists. Avoid swinging by the arms or pulling forward suddenly when walking. Teach siblings not to tug the arm. Most children outgrow this tendency by around age 5-6.

Questions or concerns?

Return if the arm remains unused 20-30 minutes after treatment, or there is swelling, bruising, deformity, a fall or direct injury, unusual distress or illness, or repeated episodes. Do not attempt treatment yourself.

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