

## LITTLE LEAGUE ELBOW: CAN I BURN OUT BEFORE I'M 16?

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Yes, you can wreck your elbow and burn out before you're 16 years old! Here's why...

Elbow pain is very common in young baseball players. Surveys of injuries among young baseball players show that 20% of players aged 8 to 12, and 45% of players aged 13 to 14, suffer from arm pain during a single youth baseball season. Usually, the pain is due to what is called "Little League Elbow" and will respond quite well with treatment. Occasionally, however, the pain progresses to something worse and can cause degenerative (arthritic) changes before the player hits the age of 20.

### What is Little League Elbow?

Little League Elbow is a condition that affects the inner (medial) part of the elbow. It happens most commonly in pitchers or anyone who does a lot of throwing. The throwing motion puts a lot of stretching stress on the inner side of the elbow. This causes inflammation of the growth plate and the tendons in that area, as well as stretching the ligaments that hold the joint tight. The result is pain, and sometimes swelling, that will progress to affect a player's athletic performance. Usually, Little League Elbow heals if the elbow is rested and treated appropriately. But if the player continues to pitch with a painful elbow, the growth plate can start to fragment into pieces that can actually be pulled off the elbow.



This can lead to permanent damage and disability.

### What is Osteochondritis Dissecans?

Sometimes elbow pain represents something more serious than Little League Elbow. The throwing motion puts a lot of compressive stress on the outside (lateral) part of the elbow. This can lead to Osteochondritis Dissecans. This is a condition in which the blood supply to a part of the elbow decreases and a piece of bone starts to break off from the underlying elbow bone. This causes pain, swelling and sometimes catching and locking sensations. The player may not be able to fully bend or straighten the elbow. If this is not treated early on and if the player continues to throw through the pain, then these changes can become permanent and lead to arthritis at a young age (sometimes as a teenager!).

### What should I do if I have elbow pain?

There are a couple of golden rules. A bit of elbow stiffness after a game can be common in pitchers, but any sharp pains or pain that persists into the next day is of concern. If you have elbow pain, you should not be pitching because this will just cause more damage. The "no pain, no gain" saying definitely does not apply with the elbow. Also, any elbow pain should be assessed early by a medical doctor because these elbow problems are a lot easier to treat earlier than later. Measures that you can do on your own include icing the elbow where it hurts (15 min. at time). More comprehensive

treatment may involve physiotherapy or athletic therapy, and your doctor may have to order certain tests such as an X-Ray, bone scan or MRI when appropriate.

### What can I do to prevent these problems?

The main cause of Little League Elbow and Osteochondritis Dissecans is too much pitching. In the United States, these problems have been reduced since they have instituted pitching limits on young players (e.g. six innings per week). Not only is the number of innings important, but the total number of pitches thrown during a game (should not exceed approximately 90 pitches) and the total number of pitches thrown during the week (should not exceed approximately 250). This includes pitches thrown in practice. Also important is to have proper throwing technique which can be reviewed by your coach. A program of forearm and shoulder strengthening and stretching is also a key feature of prevention, and should be started in the off-season. A pitcher should ideally have a rest day after pitching a game and should ice his/her elbow after a game.



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