



## Dislocation or Subluxation

### DESCRIPTION

*Dislocation* is injury to a joint that causes adjoining bones to no longer touch each other. *Subluxation* is a minor or incomplete dislocation in which the joint surfaces still touch but are not in normal relation to each other. The structures involved are the ligaments and bones in the joints, especially in the shoulders, kneecaps, and fingers. Occasionally there may be an associated fracture.

### COMMON SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

- Sudden joint pain
- Swelling
- Deformity after an injury
- Limited or absent movement around a joint

### CAUSES

- A traumatic injury that stretches or tears ligaments that surround a joint and hold the bones together
- Shallow or abnormally formed joint surfaces (congenital)
- Rheumatoid arthritis or other diseases of the ligaments and tissues around a joint

### FACTORS THAT INCREASE RISK

- Repeated injury to a joint
- Previous dislocation of a joint
- Contact sports or sports that require repetitive overhead arm motion (throwing, swimming, volleyball)
- Rheumatoid arthritis
- Congenital looseness of joints and ligaments

### PREVENTIVE MEASURES

- Appropriately warm up and stretch before practice or competition.
- Maintain appropriate conditioning that includes joint flexibility, muscle strength and endurance, and cardiovascular fitness training.
- Wear proper protective equipment and ensure a correct fit.
- Use proper technique.

### EXPECTED OUTCOME

Dislocation is usually curable with prompt treatment. After the dislocation has been corrected (reduced), the joint may require immobilization with a cast, splint, or sling for 2 to 6 weeks, often followed by physical or occupational therapy.

### POSSIBLE COMPLICATIONS

- Damage to nearby nerves or major blood vessels, causing numbness, coldness, or paleness
- Recurrent subluxation or dislocation
- Arthritis of the affected joint
- Fracture of the joint

### GENERAL TREATMENT CONSIDERATIONS

Initial treatment for dislocation is to manipulate the joint to reposition the bones, which is performed by trained personnel, usually without surgery. After this is done, treatment consists of medications and ice to relieve pain and a splint, cast, brace, or sling (upper extremity) to protect the joint and allow the ligaments and muscles to heal. Recurring dislocation may require surgical reconstruction, which may include tightening or replacement of injured structures or replacement of the joint. Physical therapy may be necessary to regain motion of the joint after immobilization or surgery and to regain strength of the muscles around the joint.

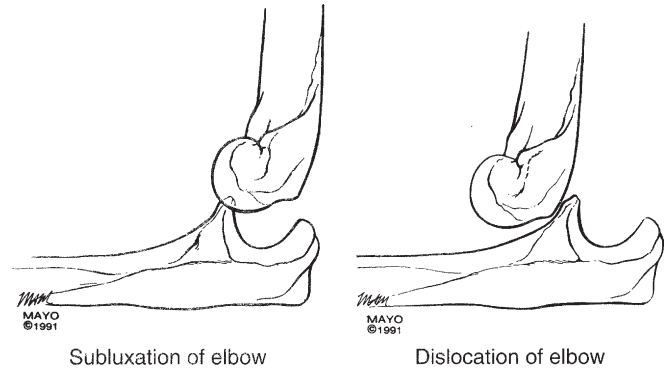
### MEDICATION

- General anesthesia, sedation, or muscle relaxers may be used to make joint manipulation possible. After this, nonsteroidal antiinflammatory medications, such as aspirin and ibuprofen, are often recommended to reduce inflammation (do not take these medications for 7 days before surgery). Take all medications as directed by your physician, and contact your doctor immediately if any bleeding, stomach upset, or signs of an allergic reaction occur.
- Other medications, such as acetaminophen, may also be used to relieve moderate pain.

- Narcotic pain relievers may be prescribed for severe pain. Use these only as directed, and take only as much as you need.

### WHEN TO CALL YOUR DOCTOR

- Symptoms get worse or do not improve despite treatment.
- You have difficulty moving a joint after injury.
- Any extremity becomes numb, pale, or cool after injury.  
*This is an emergency!*
- Dislocations or subluxations occur repeatedly.



**FIGURE 1** From DeLee JC, Drez D, Jr.: *Orthopedic sports medicine: principles and practice*, Philadelphia, 1994, WB Saunders, p 837.