

## When bones pop out

Mind Your Body, The Straits Times (Thursday, 14 August 2008)

---

A strong tug at your young child's arm could dislodge his elbow joint. Prevention is better than cure in such a case, doctors tell GABRIEL YUE.

Anyone, regardless of age, can suffer a dislocated joint but it is a particularly common injury among babies, toddlers and children aged ninemonths to four years.

Associate Professor James Hui, a senior consultant at the department of orthopaedic surgery, National University Hospital, has this advice: Whatever your age, dislocations must always be given proper medical treatment to avert complications.

A dislocation happens when the ligaments holding the joints in place break. These ligaments have to be repaired.

'For instance, the damaged bones may pop out again, whack the cartilage and damage it. In the long run, and in adults, this can eventually lead to osteoarthritis.' Prof Hui said.

A pulled elbow, particularly common among babies, toddlers and very young children, is caused by the bones sliding out of their proper position at the elbow joint.

There are, fortunately, no long term consequences known to be associated with this.

However, this can be prevented from happening in the first place by remembering that babies and very young children must be handled with extra care.

Be careful that you do not unwittingly dislocate their joints, say doctors, as this can easily happen.

'One situation is when a young child is crossing the road and the adult beside him pulls the child's hand or forearm to steer him away from danger' said Dr Kevin Lim, consultant orthopaedic surgeon, KK Women's and Children's Hospital.

'It can also occur when children are held by their forearms and swung around during play. So avoid doing both.'

Dislocations like these seldom happen to older children, who tend to get growth plate fractures instead. Growth plates, located at each end of a bone, are the softer parts of a child's bones where growth occurs and these are the weakest sections of the skeleton.

'Such injury may be mistaken for a dislocation,' said Prof Hui.

In either case, you should never try to reset the bones on your own as you can cause further damage. Parents should immobilise and support the limb and take the child to the nearest accident and emergency unit.

As for teenagers, Prof Hui said that because they are an active bunch, their most common injuries are to the knees. These injuries can damage the anterior cruciate ligament, a major ligament, and is a serious condition.

Dr Francis Wong, consultant orthopaedic surgeon at Mount Alvernia Medical Centre, pointed out that young adults should also watch out for recurrent dislocation in the shoulder. 'Usually they will require surgery to stabilise the joint once they suffer from one dislocation.'

With the onset of ageing and osteoporosis, fractures are more common among the elderly but resetting the joint should not be a problem if the bone is not fractured.

So how can you protect yourself from dislocations?

'Dislocations occur with violent force. Adults involved in contact sports should be aware of this. Good strength building and conditioning should help to prevent them,' said Dr Wong.