Radial Head Fracture

The radial head is the proximal portion of the radius (smaller of the two arm bones). This type of fracture can occur from an elbow dislocation or it may just happen from a force, such as a fall to the outstretched arm.

Symptoms:

- Pain, mainly on outside of elbow
- Swelling
- Decreased range of motion of the elbow
- Decreased supination or pronation (turning palm up or down)

How is it diagnosed?

An elbow specialist will utilize the patient history, clinical exam, and x-rays may appear normal till a week or two after the injury. Further imaging may be needed to evaluate the type of fracture and degree of damage.

Treatment

Treatment is dependent on the type of fracture or degree of damage to the radial head. Conservative treatment is advised when the fracture is small or the alignment of the radial head is within normal limits. This includes a hinged brace and activity modifications followed by a formal physical therapy program. If the radial head alignment is off or the fracture is in several pieces, surgical intervention may be advisable. This can include internal fixation of the fracture, removal of the broken pieces, or removal of the radial head. The latter is more common in older patients who are not as active or have circulation complications to the bone. Post-operatively, surgical patients would utilize a hinged brace and progress through a formal physical therapy program.