

Terrible triad of elbow

A 48-year-old female complained of left elbow pain, swelling and limited mobility after a fall from standing. X-ray revealed radial head fracture, posterior dislocation and a CT confirmed an occult coronoid process fracture (figure 1A–C).

The ‘terrible triad’ of the elbow is an elbow dislocation with concomitant fractures of the radial head and coronoid. The relation between humerus and forearm bones is destabilised, whereas the radius–ulna relation (including the interosseous membrane) is generally preserved. Neurovascular injuries are not commonly encountered; however, caution should be taken in terms of ulnar nerve injury. Emergent closed elbow reduction of the dislocation must be performed.¹ Generally, surgery is needed to maintain the stability of the elbow.

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Figure 1 Terrible triad of the elbow; elbow dislocation with radial head and coronoid fracture. (A) Anteroposterior elbow radiograph shows radial head fracture (thin arrow). (B) Lateral elbow radiograph shows elbow dislocation (asterisk) with radial head fracture (arrow head). (C) Avulsed fracture fragment of coronoid process in the extremity computed tomography after emergent closed elbow reduction (thick arrow).



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