

Grades K-5
Mini-Lesson: “Why is it called a funny bone?”

VIDEO TRANSCRIPT

VIDEO 1

Hey, it's Jay. Have you ever heard someone say that a joke tickles their funny bone? They don't literally mean being tickled. They just mean the joke fits their sense of humor. Then there's hitting your funny bone. That's something totally different. Someone named Estella has a question about that funny bone. Let's give Estella a call now.

[Video Call]

- Hi, Jay.
- Hi, Estella.
- I have a question for you. Why is it called a funny bone?
- That's a great question.

Getting a bump or taking a tumble is not fun. When someone talks about hitting their funny bone, they're talking about a spot here, near their elbow. I wear pads to protect that area when I rollerblade, but a bump can still happen accidentally. And wow, does it hurt. And it doesn't just hurt where you hit it. A strange tingling sensation travels down your arm. It almost feels like lightning is shooting out of your hand. Then, after a moment, the prickly feeling starts to fade, and your arm is back to normal. Weird, right? Whatever the funny bone is, hitting it causes a unique feeling. You probably know a bit about bones already. The bones in your body are strong and hard. They hold you up and protect other body parts, like how your skull protects your brain.

In some places, you may be able to feel the bones under your skin, like here around your elbow. Give it a try if you'd like. You might think an elbow is one big bony point, but there's more going on there. Feel what happens when you bend and straighten your arm. Or twist your hand. And check this out. This is what the bones in your arm look like. Compare this picture to what you can feel. How many bones do you think make up your elbow?

VIDEO 2

Your elbow is actually where three bones meet. That big bump you feel on your elbow, that's the bump sticking out of this bone. That bone continues down your arm toward your pinky finger. Maybe you also felt two smaller bumps here on both sides of the big one. Those bumps are parts that stick out here, near the end of this bone. That bone goes up to your shoulder. And inside the bend of your elbow, there's a third bone. You might feel it most when you twist your hand like this. That bone continues down toward your thumb. Hitting your funny bone must mean one of these arm bones, right? Well, not exactly. There's more to your arm than bones. You've got muscles too. And to move your arm, you have stretchy parts that connect the muscles and bones together. But moving your arm also takes some body parts called nerves. There are nerves throughout your body. They look kind of like cords or wires. If you start at one end of a nerve, like here, you can trace a path toward your brain. Nerves are like the communication lines between your brain and the rest of your body. When you use your senses, like touching something, your nerves send that information to your brain. Nerves also send signals from your brain that tell your muscles to move. When you bump into something, like stubbing your toe, nerves send that signal too. Ouch. There are thousands of nerve endings in your big toe. So when a bunch of them send a signal, even a small bump can feel intense. But after that sudden big pain, your toe usually goes back to feeling fine. There are nerves around

your elbow too. Check it out. Between the big bony bump and the smaller bump, there's a space that dips down. In that space is your ulnar nerve. There's not much protecting the nerve in that spot. So when you hit it, the nerve gets squished, which makes the feeling even more intense than a typical bump. The feeling also travels along the nerve. From your elbow, the ulnar nerve goes down the side of your arm and branches out into these fingers. That's why you get a tingling sensation down your arm and into your pinky. That sensation might be where the name funny bone comes from. Sometimes funny can mean strange, odd, or unusual. Not funny like a joke. Then again, other people think the name was inspired by one of the bones in your arm. It's called the humerus, which sounds like another word with a different spelling. *This* humorous means something funny. But maybe the real joke here is that funny bone is not a bone at all. It's just a nickname for your ulnar nerve. So, in summary, even though people say they hit their funny bone, that strange tingly feeling actually comes from hitting a nerve. Nerves throughout your body send signals to and from your brain. They carry information that helps you sense the world and move your muscles. When you bump into something, nerves send that information too. Ouch. When you hit the nerve near your elbow, the sensation is unusual and intense. It's a tingling pain that travels down your arm like a jolt of lightning. But then a few moments later, you usually feel fine. I hope you don't hit your funny bone anytime soon. But if you do, now you can call it by its real name: the ulnar nerve. That's all for this week's question. Thanks, Estella, for asking it.