

Tennis elbow

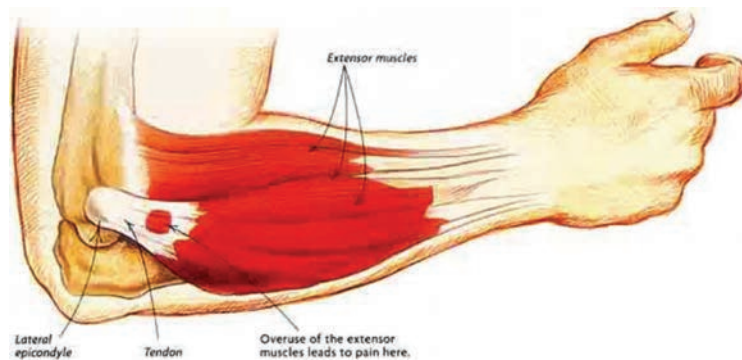
Information and advice

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This information is designed to supplement the advice given by your doctor, and is written by physiotherapists based on the latest medical advice.

What is tennis elbow?

Tennis elbow is a condition that results in pain around the outside of the elbow. Anybody can get tennis elbow but it is most common in people between the ages of 40 and 60. When a person gets tennis elbow, one or more of the tendons in their elbow become painful, thickened or swollen. The pain occurs at the point where the tendons of the forearm muscles attach to the bone. Although tennis elbow is painful, it normally recovers and it does not lead to arthritis. It is a self-limiting condition and no-one has it forever. Ninety per cent of people are better after one year.



Symptoms of tennis elbow

The main symptom of tennis elbow is pain and tenderness on the outside of the elbow. You may feel pain travelling down your forearm. Twisting movements, such as turning a door handle or opening the lid of a jar can be painful. You may also feel pain and stiffness on waking. Different people will experience varying degrees of pain, ranging from mild discomfort when using the arm to a severe ache.

What are the causes?

Tennis elbow is caused by irritation of the forearm tendons (tendons attach muscle to bone) due to overuse of the muscles or minor injury. Any activity that involves gripping and twisting of the forearm can cause this type of strain. Overusing your forearm muscles in repeated action, such as:

- Gardening, such as using shears
- Playing racket sports, such as squash or tennis
- Sports that involve throwing, such as javelin or cricket
- Manual work that involves repetitive turning or lifting of the wrist, such as plumbing or bricklaying
- Repetitive, fine movements of the hand and wrist, such as typing or using scissors.

How is tennis elbow treated?

- Avoiding activities that aggravate your symptoms is essential to allow the inflammation to settle
- For some people, rest alone may be enough to resolve the pain
- Warmth can be helpful (e.g. hot water bottle or wheat-pack). An ice pack (a bag of frozen peas wrapped in a damp tea-towel) applied to the tender area for 10 minutes twice a day can help. Please do not do this if your skin sensation is impaired. Never apply ice directly to the skin as it can cause burns
- An epicondyle clasp or strap may ease the pain if worn during aggravating activities. These are often available from your local chemist
- Anti-inflammatory tablets or gels/creams may be helpful. Painkillers may also be useful, talk to your GP or pharmacist for further information and advice.



Exercises:

The aim is to stretch and strengthen the extensor muscles, these should be done regularly.

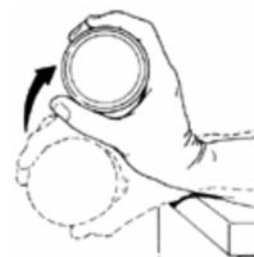
Extensor tendon stretch

Put the back of your hand against a wall and keep your elbow straight by supporting it with the other hand. Feel the stretch along the back of your forearm. Hold the stretch for 20 seconds and repeat twice. To increase the stretch, slide your hand further up the wall.



Eccentric strengthening exercise

Sit with your forearm resting on a table with your hand over the edge, palm facing down. Hold a light weight (e.g. a tin or water bottle) in your hand. Lift the weight and your wrist up with your good hand. Then taking your good hand away, slowly lower the weight down using your bad hand only. Your forearm should stay on the table at all times. Repeat 15 times and do three sets.



You may find the exercises painful, especially for the first two weeks. This is expected, but the pain should not be severe. After one week, increase the exercise to three sets of 10-15. If your symptoms are not improving within six weeks of following the above steps, please make an appointment with your GP to discuss further, as you may benefit from assessment by a physiotherapist.



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