

Tennis elbow

Introduction

Tennis elbow (Lateral epicondylitis) is a form of tendinitis – swelling of the tendons - affecting the outside of the elbow.

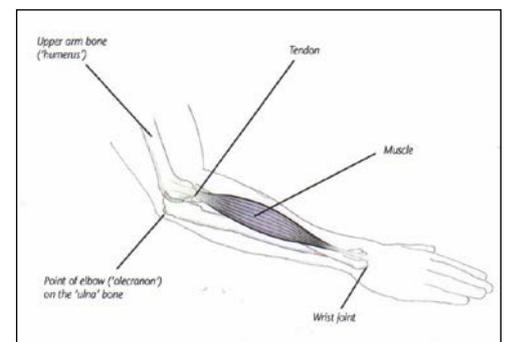
This leaflet outlines causes, symptoms, and how to manage the condition.

About your elbow

The elbow is made up of the upper arm bone (humerus) and two bones in the forearm (ulna and radius); it allows the following movements:

- To bend and straighten the elbow.
- To rotate the lower arm, i.e. turn the hand up towards the ceiling, for example, to receive change in a shop.

The joint is surrounded by muscles, some which move the elbow and some that move the wrist and fingers. Muscles are attached to bones by tendons.

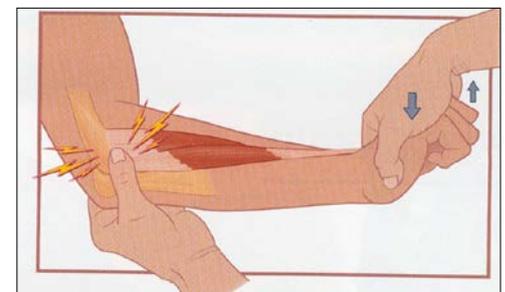


What causes tennis elbow?

Essentially, tennis elbow is where one of the tendons that attach the muscles of the wrist and fingers to the bone becomes painful, thickened or swollen. As a result, patients can experience discomfort all along the length of the muscle (which runs down into the forearm).

The exact cause of tennis elbow is not known but it is thought to be an overuse injury.

It may happen as a result of a sporting injury, from jobs or hobbies that require repetitive arm/wrist/hand movements e.g. keyboard work, gripping but sometimes it occurs for no apparent reason!



How common is tennis elbow?

Tennis elbow occurs at any age, but most frequently affects people around the age of 40 and is more common in women than men.

What are the symptoms?

- People experience varying degrees of pain on the *outside* of the elbow. The pain can be very mild, or so severe that it interferes with sleep.
- The pain is here because this is where your tendon attaches to your bone.

- The outside of your elbow may be very tender to touch at a specific point and you may notice some pain goes down into your forearm.
- Gripping or twisting movements are usually painful, such as turning a door handle or shaking hands with someone. Movements that involve using the wrist are generally painful.
- Repetitive movements usually cause pain, such as DIY work or computer mouse/keyboard work.

Managing the symptoms

Tennis elbow can be very painful and make life difficult. However, it is a self-limiting condition, which means it will eventually get better by itself, but this can be variable, ranging from a few months to several years. 80% of people however are better within 1 year.

Tips to help improve symptoms

- Resting the elbow between bouts of activity or stopping sport for a few weeks will help – the tendon needs time to heal without repetitive irritation.
- Be aware of the amount of force that you use to grip things. Try and use the minimum amount of force to maintain contact
- Never lift anything with the back of your hand showing; try to pick up 'palm up'.
- Use anti-inflammatory creams and pain-killers when things get too painful. Icing the area may also be of help. Your physiotherapist can give advice on this.
- Using a support may help. This takes tension off the tendon and usually makes an immediate difference to pain if it is going to work. Your physiotherapist will have more detail on these.



Treatment options

Physiotherapy: This may include treatment to relieve pain, reduce inflammation and scar tissue and exercise programmes to re-strengthen muscles.

Acupuncture: Has variable outcomes. You should know if it is going to help after 2-3 sessions.

Injection: Platelet rich plasma (PRP) injections are now preferred over the use of steroids

Surgery: A last resort for people with persistently painful symptoms despite other treatment. Your physiotherapist can give you more information on all these treatment options.

Further information

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This document can be made available in other languages and formats upon request.

Physiotherapy Department, January 2011

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