



# Tennis Elbow (Lateral Epicondylitis)

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Version 5

## **> About this leaflet**

The purpose of this leaflet is to give you some information about tennis elbow (which is also known as Lateral Epicondylitis) and how we treat it.

## **> About Tennis Elbow**

Tennis elbow affects the tendons on the outside of the elbow. These tendons attach the muscles that straighten your wrist and fingers to the bone. These tendons change as the body ages.

In people with tennis elbow, this area becomes painful and you may also feel discomfort in the forearm. Less frequently, a similar pain can be felt on the inside of the elbow and is known as a 'golfer's elbow'.

The key things for you to know are:

- Tennis elbow is not a serious condition – it gets better with time and no-one ever has it forever.
- It is completely safe to continue using your arm within the limits of discomfort.
- Eight out of ten people who suffer from tennis elbow are better within one year.
- You can control the pain by:
  - changing the way in which you carry out activities;
  - doing specific exercises; and
  - injections or surgery, which may be considered as a last resort in a very small number of cases.

Surgery will be considered as a last resort in a very small number of cases.

## **> Who gets Tennis Elbow?**

It usually affects people over the age of 40, and is more common in women than men. You can get tennis elbow if you do not play tennis.

## What are the symptoms?

The most common symptoms are:

- Pain on the outside of your elbow. This could be mild discomfort or severe pain interfering with your sleep.
- Tenderness at the outside of your elbow.
- Pain when lifting.
- Pain when bending or twisting your forearm.
- Pain on gripping small objects.
- Difficulty in straightening your elbow.

Repeated movements especially gripping or twisting movements may increase the pain. For example, activities such as housework, DIY and lifting and pouring from a full kettle with a straight elbow may increase your symptoms.

### Why does it happen?

We do not know the exact cause of tennis elbow. Most people do not play tennis! Most people do not report any incident that caused their symptoms but it can be related to unusual or strenuous repetitive use of the arm.

### What can I do to ease the pain?

The most important thing to remember is that it will get better on its own eventually. How long this takes can range from a few weeks to several years. 80% of people improve within one year.

Normal use of your arm will not cause you any harm, but it might make the pain worse. Until your tennis elbow gets better, you need to find ways of keeping the symptoms under control.

There are many things you can do to help yourself:

- Use painkillers and anti-inflammatory tablets. These are available from your pharmacist or your General Practitioner(GP).
- You can apply anti-inflammatory cream over the tender area. It is available from the chemist without a prescription and can have fewer side effects than tablets.
- Avoid heavy use of your arm and try to avoid the activities that make the pain worse. Be aware of the amount of force that you use to grip things. If possible, try not to grip objects as hard. If you can, try to lift things with your palm facing forwards or upwards. In other words, where possible you should not be able to see the back of your hand.
- Make the grip size on objects you use larger.
- If possible, reduce the weight of your racket or tools
- Use an ice cube massage. Apply oil to the tender area first to protect the skin and then massage with a wet ice cube wrapped in a damp cloth for up to 10 minutes.
- If your job involves repetitive manual handling activities or repetitive movements such as keyboard or mouse work, have a close look at your work activities and workstation (i.e. your desk). If your work has an occupational health department then they should be able to help you.



## Exercises

### Strengthening

Support your forearm on a table with your hand over the edge, with your palm down.

Hold a light weight – this can be a tin can or a small bottle of water.

Slowly lift your wrist up, keeping your forearm flat on the table as you do this.

Hold at the top for a couple of seconds, then slowly lower down.

Repeat 15 times for three sets - once per day.

### Stretching

Rest your arm on a table with your hand over the edge.

Bend your wrist so that your fingers are pointing to the floor. Gently press the back of your hand with your other hand, as shown in the picture.

Hold this stretch for a count of 20 seconds. Repeat 3 times, and do this 3 times per day.

The following may also help:

### Physiotherapy

This can include treatments to relieve pain, mobilise surrounding joints and nerves as well as exercise programmes to re-strengthen the muscles. Exercises are an important aspect of treatment and you will be given advice on how to modify the activities that make the pain worse. You should be able to “self-refer” to physiotherapy at your local health centre.

### Splints

There are many types available which apply pressure to the elbow. They can sometimes help to reduce the pain.

## Other advice

An occupational health physiotherapist at your work may be able to advise you further. If you are involved in a sport or hobby using repetitive movements, your instructor or coach may be able to offer you advice on techniques.



## ➤ Other treatment options

### Injections

Local anaesthetic and steroid (cortisone) can help the symptoms in the short term (a few weeks). However, an injection may be painful for a few days afterwards and the pain may return and then be worse than before this treatment.

Steroids can cause harm to the tendon and can make your symptoms last longer. Current evidence does not support the use of steroid injections for tennis elbow.

### Surgery

There is currently no clear evidence that surgery is better than letting it heal itself. This is usually carried out as a last resort, and initially it does not have a high success rate and patients are often disappointed.

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