What is tennis elbow?

Tennis elbow causes pain on the outer side of your elbow. The medical term for tennis elbow is lateral epicondylitis. The lateral epicondyle is the lower, outer, ‘bumpy’ part of your humerus bone in your upper arm.
What causes tennis elbow?

The site of the pain in tennis elbow is where some tendons from your forearm muscles attach to the bone around your elbow. The condition is usually caused by overuse of your forearm muscles in repeated actions such as wringing clothes or manual work (particularly with twisting movements such as using a screwdriver). Playing tennis or other racquet sports can also cause tennis elbow.

What are the symptoms?

For most people with tennis elbow, the pain only occurs when they use their forearm and wrist, particularly for twisting movements such as turning a door handle or opening a jar.

For some people:
- The pain is constant - occurring at rest and affecting sleep.
- The pain travels from the elbow towards the wrist.
- It is difficult to hold items such as a knife/fork, a cup or a pen.
- It is difficult to straighten the arm fully.
- There is stiffness in the affected arm.

How is tennis elbow diagnosed?

Your doctor can usually diagnose tennis elbow by talking to you about your symptoms and by examining your arms. Investigations are not usually needed to diagnose tennis elbow.

What are the treatment options for tennis elbow?

Self-Management is often all that is needed in treating tennis elbow. Treatment includes the following:

- Put an ice pack on your elbow for 10 minutes every 3 to 4 hours for 2 to 3 days or until the pain goes away. (Do not put ice directly next to skin as it may cause ice burn.)

- You can also do ice massage. Massage your elbow with ice by freezing water in a foam cup. Peel the top of the cup away to expose the ice and hold onto the bottom of the cup while you rub the ice over your elbow for 5 to 10 minutes.

- Wear a tennis elbow strap. This strap wraps around the forearm below the elbow, acting as a new attachment site for the forearm muscles and keeping them from pulling on the painful epicondyle.
- Take **anti-inflammatory painkillers** such as ibuprofen. Some anti-inflammatory painkillers also come as **creams or gels**, which you can rub over your painful elbow. These tend to produce fewer side-effects than those taken by mouth. If you cannot take anti-inflammatory painkillers, other painkillers such as paracetamol, with or without codeine added, may be helpful. Ask your doctor or pharmacist for advice.

- Do the **exercises** recommended in this leaflet (see below).

- While you are recovering from your injury you will need to **avoid repetitive motion** of the elbow and any movements that bring on your pain. Typically, pain is made worse by lifting, gripping and twisting movements of the affected arm. Resting from activities that bring on pain can help to speed up recovery. In some people, just modifying their activities and cutting out repetitive movements of the arm or hand can be enough to improve tennis elbow.

**Rehabilitation Exercises**

You may do these stretching exercises right away. If the exercises make the pain worse then reduce the number of times you do the exercises. **If at any time your symptoms change or worsen you must stop any exercises / self-management and consult your doctor.**

**Wrist active range of motion - Flexion and extension:**
Bend your wrist forward and backward as far as you can. Do 3 sets of 10.

**Wrist stretch:**
With one hand, help to bend the opposite wrist down by pressing the back of your hand and holding it down for 15 to 30 seconds. Next, stretch the hand back by pressing the fingers in a backward direction and holding it for 15 to 30 seconds. Keep your elbow straight during this exercise. Do 3 sets on each hand.
**What is the prognosis (outlook) for tennis elbow?**

Pain from tennis elbow usually lasts for six to twelve weeks. In some people it can go after as little as three weeks. However, in other people, pain can last for longer (for between six months to two years). Unfortunately, once you have had tennis elbow, it may return.

If your symptoms persist your doctor may recommend:

- **Physiotherapy**
- An injection of a corticosteroid medicine around the lateral epicondyle to reduce the inflammation.
- If the symptoms have been present for 18 months surgery may need to be considered, but most people will improve before this is necessary.

**How can I prevent tennis elbow?**

To prevent tennis elbow:

- Gently stretch your elbow and arm muscles.
- Ice your elbow after exercise or work.
- In job-related activities, be sure your posture is correct and that the position of your arms during your work doesn’t cause overuse of your elbow or arm muscles.
References

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Content in association with:

www.arthritisresearch.org

www.patient.co.uk

www.summitmedicalgroup.com

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