



Tennis Elbow

What is it?

Tennis elbow is irritation of the tendon that attaches to the bony bump on the outer side of the elbow. This tendon is responsible for moving the back of your hand and fingers up. It was previously thought the problem was due to inflammation of the tendon but research has shown the collagen which makes up the repairing tendon is weaker and not as well organised and as such is prone to reinjury and pain. The condition can be stubborn to resolve but with appropriate advice and exercises tends to a manageable level for most people. Similar symptoms can occur on the inner side of the elbow, which may be called golfer's elbow.

Symptoms

Tennis elbow is characterised by pain and tenderness in the elbow and in the back of the forearm. This is made worse by using the elbow. Symptoms vary in severity and duration, but usually include most of the following:

- recurring pain on the outside of the upper forearm just below the bend of the elbow. (sometimes, pain may be felt down the arm towards the wrist);
- pain caused by lifting or bending the arm;
- pain when writing or when gripping even small objects such as a pen;
- pain on twisting the forearm, for example, when turning a door handle; and
- difficulty extending the forearm fully.
- Most symptoms resolve within 6 months, and 90% of people report nil symptoms within a year.

What causes it?

Excessive, repeated or sustained use of the muscles that extend the wrist can cause injury to the tendons, leading to tennis elbow. Tennis elbow happens most commonly when you suddenly use your forearm muscles a lot without having used them much before, such as using power tools or a screwdriver for DIY or working in your garden. Even if you are used to this type of work, you can still overdo it. The tendons of the elbow can be injured by overuse of the forearm muscles in repeated actions such as:

- using scissors or shears e.g. gardening;
- sports that involve repetitive arm use such as throwing, swimming, racquet sports (particularly if you play very regularly after not playing for a long time, if you use a lot of backhand, or if your backhand technique is not very good) golf and;
- manual occupations that involve repetitive turning or lifting the wrist, such as typing, plumbing or bricklaying

What can you do?

The good news is most symptoms will resolve by themselves within a year by avoiding the activities which aggravate your symptoms and identifying any factors which may contribute to your symptoms and these are outlined below under “**Can you prevent it?**”.

Over the counter painkillers can be taken to treat mild pain and you should follow advice from your GP and pharmacist in this regard. Your GP may prescribe anti-inflammatory painkillers to ease pain. These are often available in creams or gel form, which can be rubbed over the affected area.

In some cases, referral to a physiotherapist may be advised if symptoms are severe or persist. Physiotherapy treatment can include exercises to stretch and strengthen the forearm muscles, along with the use of supports to reduce strain on the tendon. Acupuncture can sometimes be useful. Your physiotherapist can also provide advice on your technique.

Injection therapy can be useful if the pain is severe and does not improve with measures outlined above. It should be noted that research demonstrates pain levels after a year are the same in people who have injections and those who “wait and see”, and there is a tendency to increased rates of recurrence in those people who undergo an injection.

Can you prevent it?

The best way to avoid tennis elbow is to avoid putting too much stress on the tendons in the elbow. The following measures may help:

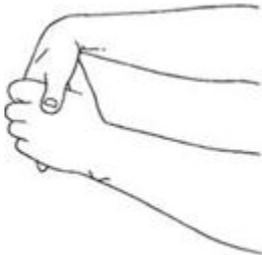
- Take relative rest from the activity that is causing you pain or find a different way of doing it. If you use your wrist and elbow more than the rest of the arm, try to spread the load to larger muscles of the shoulder and upper arm.
- If you play a sport that uses repetitive movements, such as tennis, get some professional advice on your technique, and ensure your grips are not worn to avoid strain of your elbow. A larger grip on sports equipment and work tools can help.
- Warm up and gently stretch the muscles before playing sport.
- Enlarging the grip size on racquets or tools and decreasing their weight can also help to prevent you putting excess strain on the tendons.
- Wearing a brace when you are using your arm, and taking it off when resting can help prevent further irritation to the tendons. Ask your physiotherapist for advice about the best type of brace for you.

- Increasing the strength and flexibility of your forearm muscles can help to prevent tennis elbow occurring, some examples of this are shown below.

Exercises

- The following exercises have been provided as they may help your symptoms if done regularly.
- They are not appropriate for everyone and remember to commence these exercises at a manageable level.
- The recommended time, repetitions and frequency of each exercise are intended as a guide that you may need to modify.
- It is normal to experience some muscle fatigue and generalised muscle soreness when doing a new exercise but you should not experience severe pain or acute exacerbation of your symptoms whilst doing them and particularly not for a prolonged period of time after the exercises.
- If you are not managing consult your GP.

You do not have to do all of these exercises. Find the ones that are best for you. You may wish to start with the 1st 3 exercises and then commence * and the towel exercise after 6 – 8 weeks.**



Straighten the arm to be stretched and let your hand bend towards the floor. Use your other hand to gently stretch so you feel pulling across the back of your wrist and forearm/elbow. Keep your elbow straight. Stretch to "Strain and not Pain".

Hold for 20 secs.
Repeat 3 times, 2 - 3 times per day.



Hold the fingers of the hand to be stretched below your knuckles (i.e. closer to your palm).

Gently extend the wrist until you feel the stretching at the inside of the forearm. Keep your elbow straight. Stretch approx. 20 secs. - relax.

Repeat 3 times, 2 - 3 times per day.

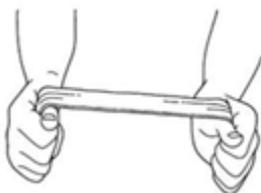


Wrist in mid-position (that is with your palm facing to the side). Put the other hand over the back of the hand to be exercised.

Try to push your the back of your hand while preventing movement with your other hand. Hold approx. 10 secs.

Repeat 10 times.

***After 4 - 6 weeks you might be able to progress this exercise by having your forearm supported with your palm facing down, holding a small tin of food and lifting your hand up 3 x 15.



Hold a towel and practise gently wringing it out forwards 10 times then backwards 10 times, 2 sets, twice daily.