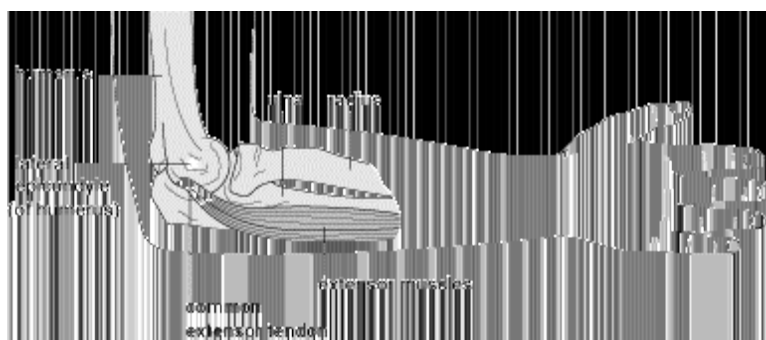


Tennis elbow (Lateral Epicondylitis)

Tennis elbow is the common name for a painful condition affecting the outside part of the elbow. It can be caused by any repeated twisting movements of the hand, wrist or forearm. The condition is most common in people aged between 35 and 55. Depending on the severity, it can take from two months to two years to heal fully.

Tennis elbow is also known as lateral epicondylitis, because it causes the bony outside of the elbow, called the lateral epicondyle, to be painful. However, the root of the problem is damage/inflammation to a tendon that joins the "extensor" muscles of the forearm to the upper arm bone (humerus). This tendon is called the common extensor tendon (see diagram, below).

The elbow



Tendon damage can occur with a single incident such as a blow to the arm. More commonly, it develops after overusing the affected arm.

Overuse causes tiny tears in the tendon. If the arm is not sufficiently rested after activity, the injury is likely to become worse, with a more serious tear or even rupture of the tendon (not a common occurrence).

What causes it?

The condition can start from a single blow, but more commonly it starts from overuse and repetitive bending of the elbow e.g. digging in the garden. Other activities might include

- Using scissors or shears
- Sports that involve a lot of throwing

- Swimming
- Golf (golfers can also get golfers elbow which affects the flexor tendon on the inside of the elbow)
- Manual occupations that involve repetitive turning or lifting the wrist e.g. bricklaying.

Weakness and inflexibility in the forearm muscles makes tennis elbow more likely.

What can you do to help?

- Ice for five to fifteen minutes at a time on the area which is most swollen and tender.
- "Over the counter" non-steroidal anti inflammatory medication (NSAID), such as aspirin, ibuprofen. Check with your pharmacist regarding possible side effects and drug interactions.
- Avoid lifting with your palms down and elbow straight. The muscle which is usually the most irritated (the extensor carpi radialis brevis) bends the elbow and pulls the wrist back. When you lift something with your palm down, you use this muscle, and when your elbow is straight, it puts much more stress on the irritated tendon.
- Wear a splint or brace which supports the tendon.
- Wait and watch.

What can a doctor do to help?

- Confirm that this actually is the problem.
- Prescribe stronger NSAID medication or cortisone type medication.
- Prescribe hand therapy and/or a custom prescription splint.
- Give a cortisone injection into the sore area.
- Perform surgery to release the chronically irritated tissues; the aim of surgery is pain relief. Mr Whitaker always tries injecting the area with steroid before offering surgery, as most cases respond and settle with steroid treatment.

What happens if you have no treatment?

It depends on how much it is bothering you - it really is a quality of life issue.

This is not a problem which can spread to other parts of your body. Many people have pain which subsides after a few months to years.

After a period of time, some people may find that they can not straighten their elbow fully. This may not be reversible even with surgery, but is rarely a problem which interferes with use of the arm.

The main reason to do surgery is to relieve pain. Some people will have a mild problem which flares up from time to time, and treat it themselves or ignore it, others will have a severe problem which prevents them from doing many things with their hand, and feel that they have no choice but to seek treatment.

Risks associated with surgery.

- Wound infection
- Excessive bruising and swelling this may last for many weeks.
- Small area of numbness in the skin close to the site of the wound, this occurs as during the operation very small nerves which supply the skin have to be cut on the way to the deeper tissues.
- Sensitivity of the scar. The scar will be on the side of the elbow in the region you experience the symptoms.

Time off work following surgery varies depending on your job and the type of activities you have to carry out. It is a minimum of two weeks.

Owner Sheila Gray

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Acknowledgement ehand .com