

Tennis Elbow

In most cases of tennis elbow, symptoms go over time whether it is treated or not. A steroid injection may speed recovery. Another option is to rub on an anti-inflammatory cream or gel to ease the pain until symptoms go. Surgery may be an option if symptoms persist.

What is tennis elbow?

Tennis elbow is a pain on the outer side of the elbow. In most cases the pain only occurs when you use the forearm, particularly on twisting movements such as turning a door handle. In some cases the pain is constant.

About 5 in 1000 adults develop tennis elbow each year.

What causes tennis elbow?

The site of the pain is where some tendons from the forearm muscles attach to the bone. The pain is due to inflammation of a tendon. This is probably caused by a small injury, or several tiny injuries, to the tendon.

The injuries are usually caused by overuse of the forearm muscles in repeated actions such as wringing clothes, manual work, (particularly with twisting movements such as screw driving). Playing tennis or other racquet sports can also cause it. It is more likely to develop if you use a lot of backhand play, or play with a lot of wrist action.

Tennis elbow is more likely to occur if you have unfit forearm muscles. For example, if you suddenly play a lot of tennis whilst on holiday, or you do a DIY project when you are not used to strong forearm actions. However, even if you are used to heavy work, you can overdo it and injure a tendon.

What are the treatments for tennis elbow?

Not treating is an option

There is a good chance that symptoms will settle in time. It may take several weeks. or months.

as tendons are 'slow healers'. One large study reported that in about half of cases, symptoms were either gone, or much improved, within 4 weeks. And within 1 year, symptoms were gone or much improved in more than 8 in 10 cases. So, one option is just to leave it and wait for symptoms to go. However, treatment may improve symptoms more quickly.

Steroid Injection

This is a common treatment. Steroids (cortisone) reduce inflammation. A dose of steroid is injected with a fine needle into the tender spot. The steroid is usually combined with a local anesthetic to make the injection painless. When the local anesthetic wears off the injection site may feel sore for a day or so.

The pain will often ease over the next week or so after the injection. You have about an 8 in 10 chance of the pain being much easier, or gone completely, within 4 weeks after a steroid injection. (This compares to about a 5 in 10 chance if you have no treatment.)

Steroid injection does not work in every case. Sometimes 2 or 3 injections are done over a period of several weeks if the first does not work. Also, in a small number of cases the pain returns within a few months of having an injection. This may be due to resuming strenuous arm activities too soon after treatment. It is best to 'go easy' for a few weeks after the pain has eased following an injection. Gradually build up to full activities.

Anti-inflammatory painkillers

These are commonly prescribed to ease pain and inflammation. Some anti-inflammatory painkillers also come as creams or gels, which you can rub over a painful elbow. Studies suggest that these may give better relief of pain for tennis elbow than tablets. There are various brands, which you can buy, or get on prescription. Ask your pharmacist for advice.

Other treatment options

- Ordinary painkillers such as Tylenol may ease the pain until symptoms ease.
- An elbow armband or bandage may help to give support and protection to the elbow until symptoms ease
- In some cases, referral to a physiotherapist or to a specialist may be advised if symptoms persist. A small number of people require surgery to relieve symptoms.

Can tennis elbow be prevented?

You often cannot avoid a sudden overuse of the arm, which can cause tennis elbow. However, if you increase the strength of your forearm muscles, which bend the wrist backwards, it may help to prevent a further bout of tennis elbow in the future. The aim is to exercise and strengthen the muscles, but to avoid twisting movements.

It is best to see a physiotherapist for advice on how to strengthen your forearm muscles. However, one way is as follows:

- Use a dumbbell or a similar object. Start with a weight of about half a kilogram.

- Sit or stand next to a small table with your forearm rested on the table, but with your wrist and hand dangling over the edge.
- Grasp the weight with your palm facing downwards. Lift the weight up and down slowly about 12-15 times. Do not twist (rotate) the forearm but lift the weight straight up and down.
- Rest for a minute or so, and then repeat the whole exercise 2 or 3 times.
- Aim for a minimum of 8 weeks of exercises on a daily basis gradually increasing the weight.
- If possible, build the weight up gradually to about five kilograms.