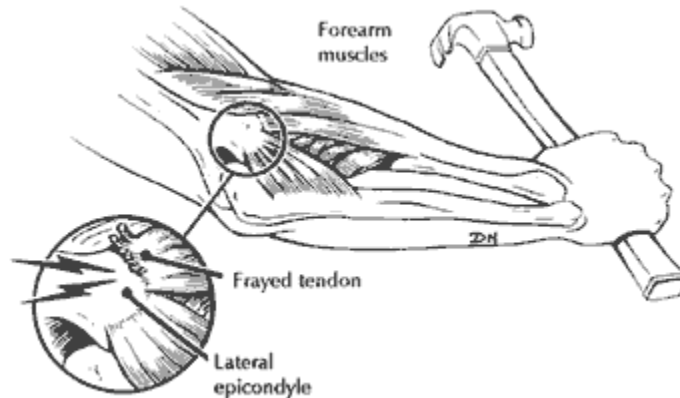


Lateral Epicondylitis – aka Tennis Elbow

What is Tennis Elbow?

Tennis elbow is a tendinosis (overuse injury) of a tendon on the outside of your elbow. It occurs when this tendon becomes irritated. The tendon on the outside of your elbow allows you to straighten your fingers and cock-up your wrist.



Causes

As the name suggest, playing racket sports can lead to Tennis Elbow injury. However, any activity that involves rotating your forearm (twisting a screwdriver) or lifting objects with you palm down can lead to this injury. With age, the tendon is more susceptible to an overuse injury.

Symptoms

Pain on the outside of the elbow when you try to pick things up or grip items.

Treatment – Initial Treatment

The main treatment option is **stretching the tendon**. This is easily performed by straightening out your arm in front of you and flexing your wrist with your thumb pointing out (thumb should be pointing inside). Next rotate your forearm so your thumb is pointing down toward the ground. You should feel the burning, achy pain on the outside of your elbow – **This is good**, you should feel this discomfort when doing this stretch correctly. Hold the stretch for 5 – 10 seconds. You should do this stretch as often as possible. An easy way to remember to stretch is to perform this stretch every time you are sitting at a red light in your car, a commercial comes on the TV and when you are walking down a hall.

Over the counter oral **Anti-Inflammatory medication** (Ibuprofen, Aleve, Motrin, Advil) as directed on the bottle for 10-14 days.

Applying **Ice** to the outside of your elbow for 15 minutes at a time can also help reduce the pain.

A **tennis elbow brace** can also help reduce the pain. It is worn around your forearm around 3 cm below the area of pain on the outside of your elbow. The brace works by allowing the muscle that straightens your fingers and wrist to pull against the brace and not the injured tendon. This allows the tendon a chance to rest and heal.

Massaging the painful area with light pressure in a circular motion can also help the tendon to heal. Perform the massage for 5 minutes a few times a day.

Remember while you are still having pain, you will find it less painful to pick things up “palm up” rather than “palm down”. The reason is when you pick up things “palm up” you fire the inside elbow muscles to lock you wrist out. However, when you pick things up “palm down” you fire the outside elbow muscle to lock your wrist out and this causes the outside elbow pain. **Pick things up “Palm UP”**.

Treatment – Other Options

A **Cortisone injection** to the outside of the elbow can help reduce the pain while the tendon is healing. It is important to continue the stretching exercise above after receiving the cortisone injection. There is a limit of 2 to 3 injections to the outside of your elbow and these injections must be spaced 2 to 3 months apart.

Physical Therapy is also another option to treat tennis elbow. The physical therapist can direct you in several stretches and also strengthening the outside muscle of the elbow and forearm. The physical therapist can also use other modalities (i.e., ultrasound or ionophoresis) to help improve the tendon healing and reduce your pain.

Results

Most times we try a “kitchen sink” approach to tennis elbow – we recommend several or all of the above treatment options at the start to improve your pain and promote tendon healing. In 95% of patients the pain on the outside of the elbow goes away with the above treatment options. It will take a few weeks of you doing the stretches and other treatment options before the pain goes away.

Surgery

If after a few months the pain does not improve and is still affecting your daily living, surgery is an option. It is an outpatient surgery that involves a 4 cm incision to the outside of your elbow and removing the unhealthy area of tendon. The area of the tendon that is removed is closed by sewing healthy tendon to healthy tendon. After surgery, a splint is worn (keeping you elbow bent at 90°) for 1 week. After 1 week, the splint is removed and you wear a removable wrist splint for 4 weeks. 6 weeks after surgery, physical therapy is started to strengthen the muscle. Physical therapy last for a total of 6 weeks.