Tennis elbow

Tennis elbow is a condition that results in pain around the outside of the elbow. When a person gets tennis elbow, one or more of the tendons in their elbow becomes painful. The pain occurs at the point where the tendons of the forearm muscle attach to the bone.

What are the causes?
Tennis elbow is caused by irritation of the tendons (tendons attach muscle to bone) of the forearm due to overuse of the muscles or minor injury. Any activity that involves gripping and twisting of the forearm can cause this type of strain. Anybody can get tennis elbow but it is most common in people between the ages of 40 and 60. Although tennis elbow is painful it normally recovers and it does not lead to arthritis.

Symptoms of tennis elbow
The main symptom of tennis elbow is pain and tenderness on the outside of the elbow. You may also feel pain travelling down your forearm. Twisting movements, such as turning a door handle or opening the lid of a jar can be painful.

The tendons in your elbow can be injured by overusing your forearm muscles in repeated actions, such as:
- Gardening, e.g. using shears
- Playing racquet sports, such as squash or tennis
- Sports that involve throwing, such as javelin and discus

Tennis elbow can also develop in the workplace from carrying out repetitive tasks and actions, such as:
- Manual work that involves repetitive turning or lifting of the wrist, such as plumbing or bricklaying
- Repetitive, fine movements of the hand and wrist, such as typing or using scissors
How is it treated?

Modify your activities

- If possible stop the particular activity that causes pain or find a different way of doing it
- If you are involved in a sport/profession using repetitive movements, seek expert advice on your technique
- Be aware of the amount of force that you use to grip things. Try and use the minimum amount of force to maintain contact
- Altering the grip size on objects you use may also have some beneficial effect
- Using a splint/brace may be helpful. Counter-force braces aim to decrease the tension on the tendon, by using the pressure from the brace on a different part of the muscle. Wear it when you are using your arm and take it off at night/resting
- Avoid lifting, gripping or rotating the affected arm. Take regular breaks when at work

Stretching exercise

Stretching the tendons will help to restore movement and encourage good alignment as the tendon heals.
Wrist stretch. Put your arm on a table with your wrist at the edge. Bend your wrist down over the table towards the floor and hold for 5 seconds. If this is too painful bend your elbow slightly.
Other treatments may include:

- Corticosteroid injection
- Acupuncture
- Physiotherapy

Recovery

- Tennis elbow is a self-limiting condition. This means that in most cases the symptoms eventually improve and clear up without treatment.
- Most cases of tennis elbow last between six months and two years. However, in around 9 out of 10 cases, a full recovery is made within one year.
- Occasionally, surgery may be used to treat very severe and persistent cases of tennis elbow.

Pain relief

Taking painkillers may help to reduce mild pain that is caused by tennis elbow. Please seek advice from your GP or pharmacist regarding appropriate pain medication for you.

Physiotherapy

You may benefit from a physiotherapy assessment if the advice given in this leaflet has not changed your symptoms.

If any of the exercises or advice in this leaflet causes your symptoms to worsen please stop the activity and seek advice from your doctor.