

# Tennis elbow

## Information for patients



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SHEFFIELD TEACHING HOSPITALS NHS FOUNDATION TRUST



## **What is tennis elbow?**

Tennis elbow (lateral epicondylitis) is a condition causing pain and tenderness around the outer aspect of the elbow joint. It commonly affects people who play racquet sports (hence the name) or manual workers though can occur in any individual.

## **What causes tennis elbow?**

We do not fully understand why tennis elbow occurs, however it is a common overuse condition affecting the common extensor tendon (this is the tendon that attaches the extensor muscles of the wrist to the outside of the elbow joint).

In the majority of cases, the tendon becomes painful without any serious damage and responds well to self-management.

## **What are the symptoms of tennis elbow?**

The usual symptoms are:

- Pain located around the outer aspect of the elbow over the bony prominence called the lateral epicondyle.
- Pain is commonly triggered by actions that extend the wrist e.g. lifting with the palm down, wringing out a dishcloth or pouring from a heavy jug/pan.
- A tender spot can usually be felt over the bone and just in front of it in the tendon itself.

## **How can I manage tennis elbow?**

Most cases of tennis elbow can be self-managed with simple things such as modification of activities, simple exercises and if necessary, painkillers.

- Massaging the elbow may help and using a topical non-steroidal anti-inflammatory gel such as ibuprofen gel may reduce the discomfort.
- Modification of activity e.g. reduced frequency or intensity of the activity causing the problem or a complete rest from it.
- Braces/clasps designed specifically to ease the symptoms of tennis elbow are available from sports shops or online. These can help ease symptoms when active by putting pressure over the extensor tendon and muscles.

## **What should I do if this doesn't help or if the symptoms are severe?**

- Physiotherapists can plan an individual rehabilitation programme which will focus on graded strengthening to improve your function.
- You may require investigations, e.g. Ultrasound or MRI if your elbow is not improving.
- Injections are rarely offered as there is evidence that these can increase the risk of reoccurrence and have the potential to cause damage to the tendons.
- In a small number of severe cases, surgery may be necessary, however the vast majority of cases settle with physiotherapy.

## **How can I avoid getting it or prevent a reoccurrence?**

- Build up slowly if you are not accustomed to an activity.
- Take breaks from repetitive elbow movements and heavy lifting.
- Try to keep physically active.
- Try to keep your weight within normal limits, as individuals who are overweight have an increased risk of tendon problems.



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