

Patient Musculoskeletal Information Sheet

Tennis elbow (lateral epicondylitis)

What is it?

It 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 it?

Tennis elbow is an 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.) With the palm facing down, when contracted the extensor muscles are the muscles that pull the wrist up to 90 degrees.

Degeneration within the tendon due to overuse results in microscopic tears causing the symptoms of tennis elbow.

In chronic tennis elbow calcification can occur around the insertion of the tendon and, in a small number of cases, larger tears can occur. However for the vast majority of patients the condition is not serious and can be self-managed.

What are the symptoms?

Usually there is pain located around the outer aspect of the elbow over the bony prominence called the lateral epicondyle. The pain is triggered by actions that extend the wrist, for example, 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 is it diagnosed?

It is usually diagnosed by your doctor asking you some questions and by a simple examination. In most cases there is no need for any special investigations such as a scan.

Can I prevent it?

- If you are new to a sport or activity get expert advice. Poor technique or incorrect equipment will increase the risk of injury
- Build up slowly if you are not accustomed to an activity. It takes time for the body to get used to new activity and tendons adapt more slowly than muscles due to their poorer blood supply, so pace yourself and if in doubt take advice from an experienced sports trainer
- DIY work is another common cause of tennis elbow, especially in those unaccustomed to physical activity. Try to break large jobs up into manageable amounts and spread them over a number of weeks. Avoid carrying out lots of repetitive actions or excessive lifting all in one go

- Before participating in strenuous activity ensure you warm up slowly
- After activity massage and stretching may help
- Good general posture and correct set up of work stations is important

How do I treat it?

In most cases it can be self-managed with activity modification, simple exercises and painkillers if required.

Your doctor can show you how to do the exercises. Alternatively, written instructions and a video explaining them can be found on our website www.kilmenysurgery.co.uk.

Simple advice:

- If the elbow feels sore try applying an ice pack for 15 mins every few hours
- Massaging the elbow may help and using a topical non-steroidal anti-inflammatory gel such as ibuprofen gel may reduce the discomfort
- Stretching after activity
- Modification of activity - reduce the frequency or intensity of any activity that causes your elbow pain, or take a complete rest from it
- In racquet sports, try increasing the size of the grip by winding more tape on it
- You can buy braces specifically made to ease tennis elbow symptoms from sports shops or online

Other treatments

Occasionally steroid injections can be done around the tendon. Some studies have suggested that patients who have injections have a poorer outcome long term and are more at risk of ongoing or recurrent symptoms. Steroid injections can be painful and have potential complications, such as tendon rupture and atrophy of the tissue resulting in permanent dimpling of the skin around the injection site.

In a small number of severe chronic cases surgery may be necessary.