Tennis Elbow

Understanding outer elbow pain and recovery

Tennis Elbow (Lateral Epicondylitis)

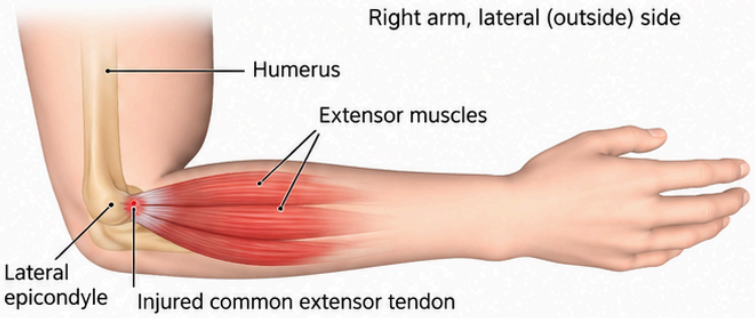
A guide to symptoms, management and exercises

Tennis Elbow (Lateral Epicondylitis)

Pain on the outside of the elbow

What is tennis elbow?

Tennis elbow is a common condition that causes pain around the outside of your elbow. It is due to irritation or small tears in the tendons of the muscles that straighten your wrist and fingers.



Why does it happen?

Tennis elbow is often caused by repetitive overuse of the elbow and wrist, leading to stress in the muscles and tendons. It is common in people who do repetitive activities at work, home or sport, and usually affects the dominant arm.

Common symptoms



Pain on the outside of your elbow

Pain with gripping or lifting

Discomfort with repetitive wrist activity

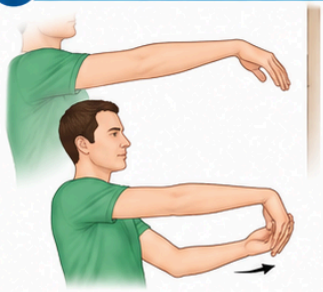
What can help?

- **Ice** – short term pain relief
- **Relative rest** – reduce aggravating activities
- **Painkillers** – e.g. ibuprofen or paracetamol
- **Wrist splint** – may reduce the load through your elbow
- **Specific exercises** – to stretch and strengthen the muscles

Exercises

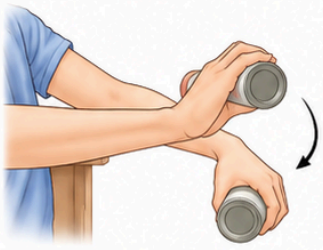
The aim is to stretch and strengthen the extensor muscles. These should be done regularly.

1 Extensor tendon stretch



- Put the back of your hand against a wall and keep your elbow straight by supporting it with the other hand.
- Feel the stretch along the back of your forearm.
- Hold for 20 seconds and repeat twice.
- To increase the stretch, slide your hand further up the wall.

2 Eccentric strengthening exercise



- Sit with your forearm resting on a table, hand over the edge, palm facing down.
- Hold a light weight (e.g. a tin or water bottle) in your hand.
- Lift the weight and your wrist up with your good hand.
- Then slowly lower the weight down using your affected hand only.
- Repeat 15 times, 3 sets.

Important information

- You may find the exercises painful, especially in the first two weeks. This is expected, but the pain should not be severe.
- After one week, increase to 3 sets of 10–15.
- If your symptoms are not improving within six weeks, please make an appointment with your GP, as you may benefit from assessment by a physiotherapist.

Symptoms and management

Practical ways to reduce pain and improve function

Symptoms

Pain may be felt around the outside of the elbow and forearm. Gripping, lifting and repeated wrist activity can be uncomfortable. Gentle movement may ease stiffness.

Treatment approaches

1. Ice therapy

Apply an ice pack or frozen peas wrapped in a damp towel for up to 15 minutes, every three hours and up to four times daily. Never place ice directly on the skin.

2. Relative rest

Reduce or adapt activities that make your symptoms worse, including prolonged or repetitive use of the hand and elbow.

3. Pain relief

Over-the-counter painkillers may help manage discomfort in the short term. Ask a pharmacist if you have questions.

4. Wrist splint

If symptoms are not improving, a wrist splint may help reduce the load through the elbow. Splints are available from pharmacies or online.

5. Exercise

Specific strengthening exercises can help improve arm strength and support your return to everyday activities.

REMEMBER

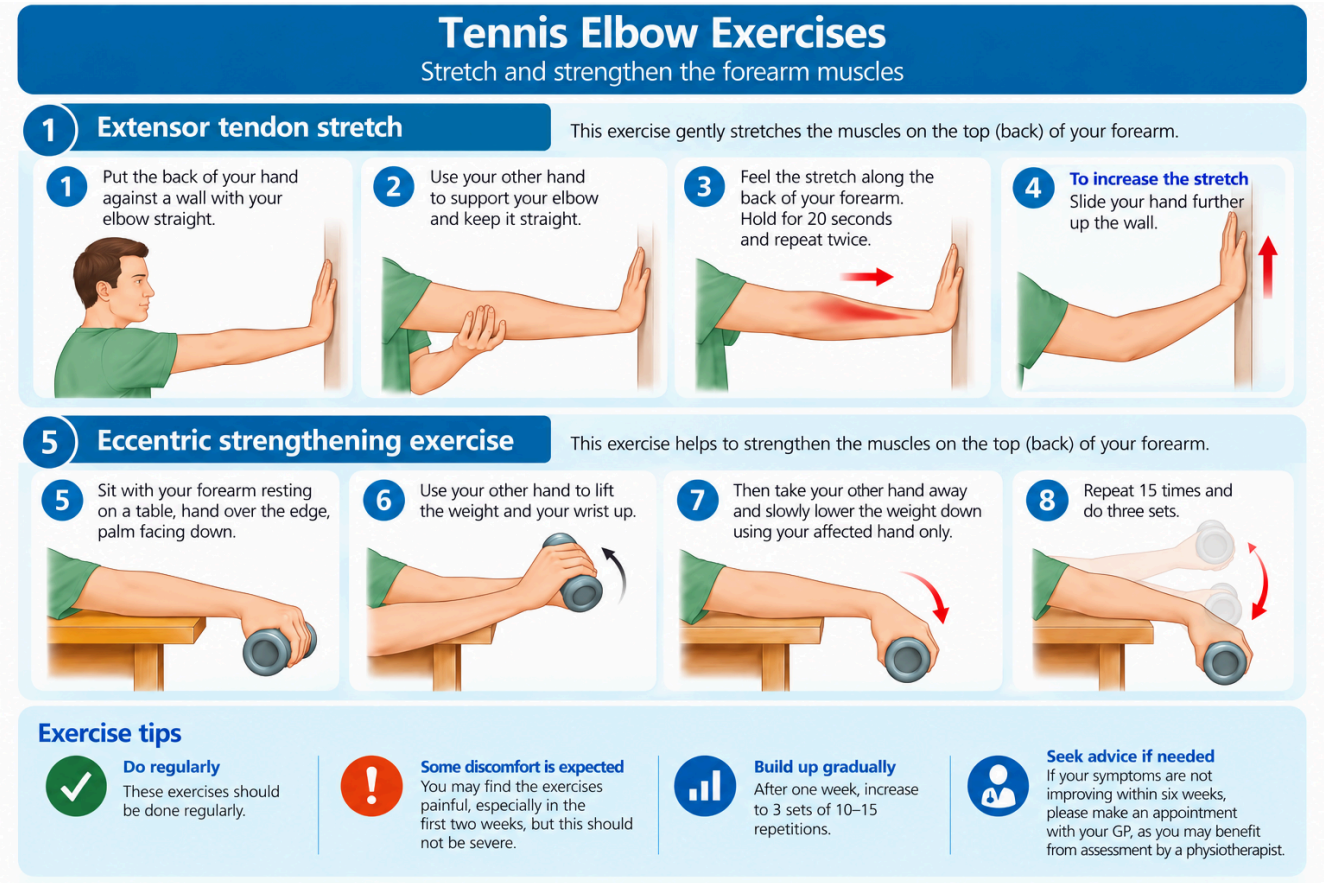
Modify activities that increase pain and progress exercises gradually.

Exercises and rehabilitation

Stretch and strengthen the forearm muscles

Tennis elbow exercise guide

Exercise gently and regularly. Avoid severe or increasing pain.



Exercise safety

Stretch: hold for 20 seconds and repeat twice.

Strengthening: use your other hand to lift the weight, then slowly lower with the affected hand.

Some discomfort may occur, but pain should not be severe. Progress gradually.

If symptoms are not improving within six weeks, speak to your GP or physiotherapist.

Strengthening and next steps

Exercise guidance, precautions and when to seek help

Eccentric wrist strengthening

Rest your forearm on a table, palm down, with your hand over the edge. Hold a light weight, such as a tin or water bottle. Use your other hand to lift your wrist and the weight, then remove that hand and slowly lower using the affected arm. Keep your forearm supported.

Repetitions and progression

Repeat 15 times for three sets, as tolerated. After one week, aim for three sets of 10-15 repetitions. Increase gradually rather than pushing through significant pain.

Precautions

Reduce activities that worsen symptoms, particularly repetitive gripping, lifting and wrist movements. Some discomfort during the first two weeks may occur, but pain should not be severe. Stop or modify exercises if symptoms significantly worsen.

When to seek help

If symptoms have not improved within six weeks of following the advice, make an appointment with your GP. A physiotherapy assessment may be helpful.

Key message

Gradual strengthening and activity modification can support recovery.

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