

Tennis Elbow

Information for patients

The information in this leaflet is intended solely as a guide. If you have questions about any aspect of your care or this booklet, please ask a health professional.

This leaflet will give you some information about:

- Tennis elbow
- How you can help yourself with simple treatments
- Other treatment options.

What is tennis elbow?

Tennis elbow (or lateral epicondylitis) is a very common condition that causes pain on the outside of the elbow. It generally affects the tendons that attach the muscles of your wrist and finger extensors (the muscles that lift the back of your hand up) to the bone on the outside of the elbow. It can occur at any age although it is more common over the age of 40. Up to 4 in 10 people develop tennis elbow during their life.

It is not a serious condition and typically gets better with time, although it can take between 6 and 24 months to settle.

What are the symptoms?

- Pain over the outside of the elbow where the extensor tendons of the forearm attach
- The outside of your elbow may be very tender to touch
- Pain and discomfort may spread into the forearm
- Pain with gripping, twisting and lifting activities (e.g. turning door handles and lifting the kettle)
- Your grip may feel weak
- If the pain is severe it might disturb your sleep.

What are the causes?

The exact cause of tennis elbow is unknown. Most people who develop it don't play tennis and it rarely occurs with an obvious cause.

It is thought to be due to overuse of the tendons on the outside of the elbow, usually occurring with repetitive hand and wrist movements such as those involved in DIY, housework or repetitive computer work.

How is it diagnosed?

Tennis elbow is a clinical diagnosis based on your history and a physical examination. Therefore it is important to have your symptoms clinically assessed by an appropriate health professional. Further imaging, (including x-rays, ultrasound and MRI) are rarely required, particularly if there has not been a fall or an injury.

What can I do to help it?

Tennis elbow is not a harmful or serious condition, and the majority of cases will get better naturally with time. After 1 year- eight out of ten people with tennis elbow will have significant improvement whether they have treatment or not. Some people may not want or need specific treatment and may decide to let their elbow heal naturally. However, there are some things that you can do yourself (self-treatment) which may help to improve your elbow pain.

No single treatment has been shown to give better results than any other for tennis elbow.

In the early stages, treatment is often aimed at controlling pain and allowing the soft tissues in your elbow to settle down. This may include:

- **Painkillers/ anti-inflammatory medication/ ice or heat packs**

You should consult your GP or pharmacist before taking medication especially if you have other health problems.

Anti-inflammatory, non-steroidal or “cold” gels or creams can be rubbed into the painful area. Always consult your pharmacist prior to using anti-inflammatory gels or creams.

- **Relative rest**

Continuing to use your arm will not cause long term damage. It can be helpful to ease the pain in your arm by resting or by adapting activities to lessen the pain. Here are some tips that may be useful:

- Where possible lift and grip with your palm facing upwards
- Try to use the minimal amount of force to grip objects
- Increase the grip size and/or reduce the weight of objects or tools you use where possible (e.g. you can wrap a bandage around a golf club or hammer to increase the grip size diameter)
- Use a different mouse (e.g. a thumb mouse) and keep your workstation or tools close to your body
- Using a tennis elbow brace may help with symptoms and allow you to continue with normal activities (please note that these do not work for everyone). The brace is usually only worn when carrying out activities that cause pain. They can be purchased from internet suppliers or some chemists.

- **Maintaining healthy lifestyle habits**

Our general health can have an impact on the pain levels we experience, as well as on the health of tendons themselves. For example, certain medical conditions (such as diabetes or hormonal imbalances), smoking and alcohol can make us more prone to developing tendon pain. More information can be found at:

www.nhsinform.scot/healthy-living



Exercise

Stretching and strengthening the area can help tennis elbow. No single exercise or stretch has been shown to be more effective than another. It is also a good idea to keep your shoulders strong to help take the pressure off the painful tendons.

Visit the link or scan the QR code below for more information about tennis elbow and some exercises you can try:

NHS Inform - Exercises for tennis elbow

www.nhsinform.scot/illnesses-and-conditions/muscle-bone-and-joints/exercises/exercises-for-tennis-elbow



If you feel you need more support, you may be referred to physiotherapy.

Physiotherapy

Through a thorough examination, a physiotherapist can:

- Help you establish what might be causing your pain.
- Provide you with a personal treatment plan to manage your symptoms and keep your arm strong and flexible.
- Advise and arrange further investigation if required.

Other treatment options

In some cases, people may wish to consider other options if they have been unable to control pain or regain function with the methods described above. However, it is important to remember that tennis elbow is a condition that usually gets better on its own in time.

As these treatments are more invasive, they carry more risk. They may not be safe or appropriate for everyone.

Speak to your GP or health care professional about the options available to you.

These options may include:

- **Steroid injections**
These can help with short term pain relief but are unlikely to help in the long term. Studies have shown that steroids can weaken tendons, and they are not safe or appropriate for everyone. Research has also shown that after 1 year, people who have had an injection for tennis elbow tend to be worse off than people who have not had a steroid injection.
- **Surgery**
In very rare situations, surgery may be recommended. However, surgery for tennis elbow does not have a high success rate and people are often disappointed with the results.
- **Shockwave therapy**
This treatment involves high energy sound waves being delivered through the skin to help with pain. There is no strong evidence to suggest that this treatment is of value and it is, therefore, not offered in NHS Lothian.

- **Platelet Rich Plasma**

This treatment involves taking a sample of blood and separating the platelets from the plasma. Platelets are the blood cells which promote healing and can then be injected back into the affected area. Currently, the long term effectiveness is not known and it is, therefore, not offered in NHS Lothian.

Further information can be found at:

NHS Inform – Tennis Elbow

www.nhsinform.scot/illnesses-and-conditions/muscle-bone-and-joints/conditions/tennis-elbow

