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TENNIS ELBOW (LATERAL EPICONDYLITIS)

Tennis elbow is an inflammation around the bony knob on the outer side of the elbow. It occurs when the tissue that attaches muscle to the bone becomes irritated. The bony knob is called the lateral epicondyle, and tennis elbow is also called lateral epicondylitis.

The most common symptom of tennis elbow is pain on the outer side of the elbow and down the forearm. The pain can be constant or mainly when you lift things. The elbow may also swell, get red, or feel warm to the touch. It may hurt to grip things, turn your hand, or swing your arm.

The muscles that allow you to straighten your fingers, extend (bend back) the wrist, and rotate your lower arm and wrist are called the extensor muscles. These muscles extend from the outer side of your elbow to your wrist and fingers. A cord-like fiber called a tendon attaches the extensor muscles to the elbow. Overuse or an accident can cause tissue on the tendon to become inflamed or injured. Any activity that involves extending the wrist or rotating the forearm, such as twisting a screwdriver or lifting heavy objects with your palm down, can cause tennis elbow.

Diagnosis

The physician can usually diagnose tennis elbow from your symptoms and from the look and feel of your elbow. An x-ray may be ordered to be sure the bone is not diseased or fractured. In a few cases, other tests may be needed.

Treatment

The treatment will depend on how inflamed your tendon has become. Wearing a tennis elbow splint allows the inflamed tendon to rest and heal. Using the opposite hand or changing your grip also helps take stress off the tendon. Anti-inflammatory medication may be prescribed to help reduce the swelling. Ice packs at least three times per day may relieve pain and reduce swelling. In some cases, an injection of an anti-inflammatory medication, such as cortisone, may be given. You will be asked to start an exercise program to stretch and strengthen the muscles around your elbow.

If your symptoms persist for a long period of time, or other treatments don't relieve them, your physician may recommend surgery to repair the inflamed tendon.

To prevent a flare-up after treatment, grip with palms up, lift with both hands, continue to exercise, and warm up before sports.