



Tennis Elbow (Lateral Epicondylitis)

Tennis elbow isn't limited to athletes. It's usually caused by repetitive movements and can affect anyone who strains their forearm muscles regularly — from plumbers to painters, from tennis players to typists.

What is Tennis Elbow?

Tennis elbow — also known as **lateral epicondylitis** or **elbow tendinopathy** — is caused by small tears or swelling in the tendons that attach the forearm muscles to the upper arm bone (the humerus).

These tendons help you grip, lift, and twist — so when they're inflamed or damaged, everyday tasks can become painful.

Symptoms to Watch For

- Pain or tenderness on the **outside of the elbow**
- Pain that radiates into the forearm or upper arm
- Weak grip or forearm strength
- Discomfort when:
 - Lifting or bending your arm
 - Turning a doorknob
 - Using tools or shaking hands
 - Typing or using a mouse
- Swelling (if there's tendinitis)
- Difficulty straightening your arm fully

The pain can range from mild to severe and might interfere with sleep or daily tasks.

When to See a Doctor

See your healthcare provider if:

- Pain continues for more than **2 weeks** despite rest
- You notice **swelling, redness**, or warmth around the elbow
- Pain worsens or affects your ability to work or sleep
- You experience **tingling, numbness**, or changes in skin colour in your arm or fingers

A doctor may perform a physical exam and, if needed, order imaging (ultrasound or MRI) to confirm the diagnosis.

Treatment Options

If pain doesn't ease after **6 weeks**, your doctor may recommend further support:

Physiotherapy

Often the most effective treatment, involving:

- Massage
- Stretching and strengthening exercises
- Ultrasound therapy (to increase blood flow)
- Advice on posture or movement changes

Corticosteroid Injections

Can help reduce pain and swelling in the short term, but don't prevent recurrence.

Surgery

Reserved for rare, persistent cases lasting more than **6 to 12 months**. May slightly reduce grip strength.

How to Prevent Tennis Elbow

You can lower your risk by:

- Taking **regular breaks** from repetitive tasks
- Using correct technique and posture in work or sport
- Avoiding lifting heavy items with a straight arm and palm down
- Strengthening your forearm muscles through gentle resistance exercises
- Using properly sized equipment (e.g. correct tennis racquet grip)

Causes: It's Not Just About Tennis

Despite the name, **only about 5%** of cases are linked to playing tennis. Common causes include:

- Typing and mouse use
- DIY tasks (hammering, screwing)
- Repetitive factory work
- Cooking (especially meat cutting)
- Plumbing and painting
- Rowing, racquet sports, or even playing instruments

It's most common in people aged **30–65**.

References

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7. South African Society of Physiotherapy. [Tendon injury rehab protocols]
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