What is Tennis Elbow?

Tennis elbow, also known as tendonitis, refers to a painful injury caused by inflammation of the outer tendons of the elbow. Pain occurs near the elbow, sometimes radiating into the upper arm or down to the forearm. Carpenters, gardeners, painters, musicians, manicurists, and dentists are at higher risk for tennis elbow.

What causes it?

Tennis elbow occurs when the outer tendons of the elbow are overworked and become inflamed by repetitive wrist or arm motion. This can occur with such activities as hand shaking, tool use, hand gripping or squeezing, or improper stroke technique and/or equipment with racquet sports.

How do you know you have Tennis Elbow?

The symptoms can develop gradually, beginning as mild and worsening over time. There may be no specific injury. The common signs and symptoms include pain or burning on the outer part of your elbow and weak grip strength. Symptoms usually worsen with forearm activity and can affect one or both arms.

A healthcare provider will obtain a medical history and perform a physical examination to pinpoint the area of inflammation. Sometimes, additional tests like x-rays are necessary to rule out other causes.

How do you treat it?

The main goal in treating tennis elbow is to reduce pain and inflammation. Most people obtain relief with rest, ice, compression, elevation, and over-the-counter anti-inflammatory medicines such as aspirin, naproxen, or ibuprofen.

Elbow bands or braces may be used to compress the forearm muscle taking the pressure off the inflamed tendon and providing pain relief.

Specific exercises can be done to help strengthen the forearm muscles as well as massaging of the muscles to promote muscle healing.

Having your sports equipment checked if you participate in racquet sports can help symptoms from recurring. Stiffer racquets or looser-strung racquets can reduce the stress on the forearms. Decreasing the size of the racquet head can also help.

How do you prevent Tennis Elbow?

• Warm up or stretch before physical activity.
• Strengthen muscles around the joint.
• Take frequent breaks from repetitive movements.
• Use two hands to hold heavy tools; use a two-handed backhand in tennis.
• Begin new activities or exercise regimens slowly. Gradually increase physical demands following several well-tolerated exercise sessions.
• If a history of tendinitis is present, consider seeking guidance from your doctor or therapist before engaging in new exercises and activities.

When do I call my doctor?

Contact your doctor if the pain does not subside after the use of over-the-counter pain medications, rest, ice, compression and elevation.
Sources of additional information
National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases (NIAMS)
Information Clearinghouse
National Institutes of Health
1 AMS Circle
Bethesda, MD 20892-3675

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