

AthletiHINTS



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Tennis Elbow

Introduction

Lateral epicondylitis, more commonly known as tennis elbow, is an overuse injury of the wrist extensor tendons that attach along the outside of the elbow. With this condition, the tendons begin to degenerate as a result of inflammation, a tear or compromised blood flow. The term “tennis elbow” was coined because the wrist extensors withstand significant repeated force, and are frequently injured, with a tennis backhand stroke.

Common Patient Population

Factors that predispose individuals to the onset of symptoms include age (middle age), hormonal balance (in women) and inadequate strength, endurance, and flexibility of the wrist extensor muscles. Prolonged or repetitive wrist action or stabilization contributes to tissue overload. Activities in which these actions are common include carpentry work, excessive computer keyboard time, weight lifting, needlework, cooking, gardening, playing the piano, video games and racquet sports.

Signs and Symptoms

Pain is initially felt over the outside of the elbow and is produced by resisted wrist extension, as in lifting a coffee cup or shaking hands. The pain is usually described as a dull aching pain, but can feel like sharp twinges or straining sensations related to activities such as gripping and lifting. Generally, there is no pain at rest. Other symptoms include tenderness to touch at the outside of the elbow, weakness with gripping or repetitive forearm rotation, localized swelling and increased skin temperature. In severe cases, pain may radiate down the forearm into the back of the hand.

Management

Generally, lateral epicondylitis is managed conservatively. Treatment can include:

- Ice application with an ice cup or ice pack three times a day for 10 - 15 minutes. Ice minimizes inflammation and decreases pain.
- Physician-prescribed non-steroidal anti-inflammatory medication.
- Treatments such as electrical stimulation, iontophoresis, ultrasound and phonophoresis by a physical or occupational therapist.
- Friction massage to stimulate tissue repair.
- Stretching to increase the length of the wrist extensors, usually three times a day.
- Gradual progression of strengthening exercises for the wrist musculature.
- Discontinuation of repetitive activities that produce pain.

Prevention

As with any overuse injury, prevention is the best treatment. Tennis elbow can be prevented by avoiding gripping or lifting heavy objects with the palm down and wrist flexed and by avoiding repetitive wrist motions. Another key to prevention is to use tools or racquets with a properly sized grip. Quite frequently, these grips are too small.

Conclusion

Elbow problems are frequently the result of overuse. Conservative treatment focuses on pain control, decreasing inflammation, rest, and elimination of aggravating activities. The closer to the onset of symptoms that treatment begins, the more successful it will be.