

Australian Association of Musculoskeletal Medicine

MANAGEMENT OF LATERAL ELBOW PAIN (TENNIS ELBOW)

What is lateral elbow pain?

Lateral elbow pain refers to pain felt on the outside of the elbow. It is a common complaint, usually resulting from repetitive use or sustained contraction of the forearm muscles. Lateral elbow pain has been given many different names in the past. These include; tennis elbow, lateral epicondylitis and extensor tendonosis.

Many of the muscles that move the wrist and fingers are found on the lateral side of the elbow where they attach to bone. Lateral elbow pain is usually due to strain in one or more of these muscles close to their bony attachment.

What are the symptoms?

Lateral elbow pain is usually deep, dull and aching. This pain can spread down the forearm to the hand, and/or up the arm to the shoulder. Pain can be present at rest but more commonly is brought on or aggravated by activity, especially lifting, twisting and grasping.

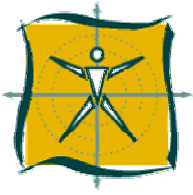
What tests are useful?

Lateral elbow pain is diagnosed on the basis of the medical history and physical examination. It cannot be diagnosed by any blood test or on X ray.

What is the treatment?

The goals of treatment are to relieve your pain and allow you to resume your normal activities with as little discomfort as possible. Following are some simple measures that will help you achieve these goals.

1. *Avoidance of aggravating activities* is the most important aspect of treatment. This includes work, domestic and sport activities. The avoidance may not have to be complete. A decrease in frequency or rate of the activity may be sufficient. Learning to modify the way some activities are performed may also be helpful. In general, performing activities with the palm up will be less stressful than performing them palm down.
2. *Heat and ice* are good at controlling pain. Heat may be applied on a regular basis. Heat or ice may be applied to the outside of the elbow before activity to reduce discomfort. Ice is best used to relieve pain after an aggravating activity.
3. *Pain killers* are useful. Your doctor will advise you as to the best and safest ones to use. Anti-inflammatory tablets have not been shown to have any extra benefit over paracetamol.
4. *Stretching and strengthening exercises* for the forearm muscles are often helpful. A specific exercise program can be devised by a musculoskeletal physician to maximise your functional recovery.
5. *Massage* of the painful muscle(s) is often helpful.
6. *A counter-force brace* is a tight non-flexible strap worn just below the elbow. It is believed to relieve the strain on the injured muscle(s) at the elbow. It is particularly helpful when used whilst performing aggravating activities.



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7. *An Injection* of steroidal anti-inflammatory with local anaesthetic is the most effective treatment for lateral elbow pain. This is not very painful and is well tolerated. Side effects can occur, but are rare. This is your best option if the above suggestions have not helped. For best results it is suggested to do strengthening and stretching exercises in the weeks following the injection.
8. *Total rest* with your arm in a sling is best avoided. It can be used for very severe pain, but even then only for a very short period.
9. *Extracorporeal shock wave therapy* is a promising new treatment for more chronic cases.

The above information should allow you to understand the nature of your condition and how to manage it. The information provided is based on the currently available scientific evidence. You will notice that his approach does not involve the use of expensive tests or gadgets, and does not involve the patient attending for treatment several times a week. Instead, you are given the information and thus can help develop the management plan. You are encouraged to play a proactive role in the management of your problem. Active patient participation in their treatment is known to improve results.

Musculoskeletal physicians are doctors who have done extra postgraduate training in the management of a wide range of musculoskeletal conditions including lateral elbow pain. Our aim is full restoration to a functional and healthy state as quickly as possible