

Tennis elbow

With spring in the air and summer approaching many of us will be shaking out the tennis gear and getting ready for a few hits around the court. Alternatively you may be looking out the window and seeing the weeds climbing high and the trees all over grown, and be thinking about doing the gardens and tidying up the yard. These are 2 of the common ways people develop tennis elbow, or if we use its technical name 'lateral epicondylitis'.

Lateral epicondylitis refers to pain and inflammation on the outside of the elbow joint (lateral epicondyle) and into the forearm. It is commonly termed tennis elbow as it is a condition which frequently affects tennis players due to over use of their forearm muscles.

There are over 10 muscles in our forearm which insert either close to, or on the outside of the elbow. The bony point on the outside of the elbow is known as the lateral epicondyle. With all these muscles inserting at the same point, they can start to pull at the tendon and bone if you are over using the muscles, or performing repetitive tasks. Once this inflammation develops it takes a long time to heal. The tendons in our bodies have a very poor blood supply, they are a white tissue to look at, rather than a muscle which is red and has excellent blood supply and therefore heals quickly.

True tennis elbow is an over use injury. This means it has an insidious onset and the symptoms gradually appear. You may start to notice a bit of pain after a hard game or days' work. This starts to happen every day, and then progresses to pain during the day. It will then progress to be painful with any tasks involving gripping or lifting. In the worst cases it can keep you awake at night and cause locking in the joint.

You can also get tennis elbow symptoms from a one off incident. This is usually from gardening, digging or a hard knock directly on the outside of your elbow. This is painful at the time of the activity and the pain will usually worsen over the next few days. It is due to inflammation in the area due to the muscles constantly pulling on the one spot, and not allowing adequate blood flow to heal. Micro tears develop in the tendon causing pain and further damage. If we perform a day of doing something we are not used to the muscles will be sore. But due to the number of muscles all attaching at the same area of the elbow, it creates a larger area of damage in the tendon which is very slow to heal.

The main symptoms of tennis elbow are pain with gripping, lifting or carrying things in your hand. It is painful to bring your wrist backwards as this is the action the muscles perform. Your elbow will be very tender to touch on the outside bone, and pain may

travel down your forearm. There may be swelling in the outside of the elbow and some redness from the inflammation.

Treatment can include anti-inflammatories and pain relief medication, ice should be applied and you should rest from the activity. Physiotherapy can help with massage, acupuncture, stretching exercises and specific exercises to strengthen the muscles of the forearm. Studies have shown that eccentric exercises are the best way to rehabilitate the elbow, and prevent the reoccurrence of the condition.

A brace may also help to support the area. Correct tennis elbow braces should be worn just under the crease of the elbow. They allow the area where the tendon inserts into the bone to heal and rest rather than constantly being aggravated. A general full covering elbow support will not help

A research study which was completed last year showed that a cortisone injection in to the elbow for tennis elbow would in fact make the condition worse than if it had just been left alone. Whilst a cortisone inject may give you instant relief, in the elbow, it will in fact do more damage than good. In the study people receiving physiotherapy or just basic advice to rest and stretch their arm, were significantly better after 12 months, and the group which had received the cortisone injection were actually worse. This is not to say that cortisone injections do not help in other joints, but in the case of tennis elbow they should not be performed.

Tennis elbow can take a long time to heal and can be very frustrating for the person suffering from it. Your neck can also affect the nerves that pass through the elbow and add to the problem. If you are suffering from Tennis elbow it is best to have a consultation and learn the correct things to do to help your elbow, because it is one of those conditions that will continue to get worse if left.