

Tennis Elbow



Lateral epicondylitis, better known as tennis elbow, is a common condition treated by physical therapists. More often than not, tennis is not the cause. Tennis elbow is repetitive motion activities. This syndrome is seen more in men, ages 35-50, and tends to involve the dominant arm.

Tennis elbow is commonly characterized by pain over the outer elbow, which can be aggravated by gripping, heavy lifting, or simple tasks of daily living. Overuse of the muscles that extend the wrist, such as activities that require repeated gripping or twisting, may precede the onset of pain. The patient usually has no pain at rest, but will have increased pain with use. Activities such as gripping are painful. Along with pain at the outer elbow, there may be tenderness in the forearm.

Treatment of tennis elbow focuses on relieving pain, controlling inflammation, promoting healing, improving local and general fitness, and controlling force loads. Physical therapy uses a variety of modalities to relieve pain. Cold packs, ice massage, moist heat and ultrasound are some examples. Ice and electrical stimulation are used to decrease inflammation, as well as medication given by

the doctor. Use of modalities helps enhance tissue healing by increasing circulation.

Patients with tennis elbow should not overuse their arm during the early healing phase. Activities that aggravate symptoms should be avoided. A deep form of massage called transverse friction massage is also used to help promote tissue healing.

While the above treatment is initially important, improving general fitness, local flexibility and strength is key. Flexibility is often decreased at the wrist, and exercises should begin early to improve this. Early strengthening consists of low-load, high-repetition exercises.

Finally, controlling force loads is crucial. An analysis of the patient's activities will aid in determining the cause and preventing a repeat injury. Occasionally, conservative treatment is not successful and surgery is needed although this only happens in 10% of cases.

For most, physical therapy in conjunction with patient education will cure the patient's problem as well as prevent further problems. If you become aware of how you use your body to perform activities that put you at risk for tennis elbow, you can avoid this often painful problem.