

Tennis Elbow

Tennis elbow (lateral epicondylitis) is an injury that presents frequently to sports medicine centres. It results from degeneration of the tendon attaching the wrist extensor muscles to the lateral epicondyle (bony prominence on the outside of the elbow). The degenerative process can be present for months before symptoms develop. As a result of the degeneration, the tendon becomes thin, weak and frayed. The fragile tendon fibres become separated from each other lengthwise and disrupted in cross-section, therefore leading to a decrease in tendon strength, which makes it susceptible to aggravation by normal everyday activities such as carrying shopping bags, lifting objects, playing tennis etc.

Treatment needs to be focused on strengthening the remaining areas of tendon, thereby increasing the load it can withstand, reducing symptoms and allowing a return to normal activity. Research shows that a specific type of strengthening, using Eccentric (or lengthening) contractions are best suited to stimulate collagen fibre deposition and restore tendon strength. A structured eccentric strengthening programme, with progressive and controlled increases in load gives the best outcome. However it can take between 6 –12 weeks to see the benefit. In persistent cases a course of Radial Pulse Shockwave may be beneficial in conjunction with the strengthening exercises.



Bracing has been shown to be effective (depending on your level of injury) in reducing pain levels and assisting with treatment. It does this by changing the load distribution within the tendon, placing less force through the damaged areas. This can allow a more rapid return to activity, as the brace reduces symptoms, but long-term recovery can only be achieved via the use of eccentric strength exercises. It is important to try and avoid aggravating activities during the treatment period.

Despite the widespread belief that the pain is caused by inflammation, studies have shown that there are no inflammatory cells present. This absence of inflammation explains why in most cases, anti-inflammatory medications (NSAIDs) offer little relief. A better alternative may be a simple analgesic medication such as Panadol or Panadeine, which can still be beneficial and has fewer side effects.