Tennis elbow? [1]

Alice,

What is tennis elbow?

Answer

Dear Reader,

What’s in a name? That which we call, er, tennis elbow?

Tennis elbow, also known as lateral epicondylitis and epitrochlear bursitis (see Bursitis, a pain in the? [2] for some info on the inflammation of the bursae) is a painful irritation that can develop from straining the small tendons that attach to the outside of your upper arm near the elbow. It causes pain in your elbow from repeated motion and muscle stress. Tennis elbow can develop in just about anyone, but it’s most common for folks between 30 to 50 years of age.

Now, time for a basic anatomy recap! You might recall seeing in science class or in a dissection lab that muscles attach to bone by tendons and other connective tissue. Tennis elbow primarily occurs in the tendons that attach your forearm muscles to the bone on the lateral side of your elbow. The inflammation that occurs in tennis elbow originates often because a tiny tendon on the outside of the elbow, called the extensor carpi radialis brevis (ECRB), is trying to stabilize the muscles of the forearm. If this tendon begins to feel strained or overused, microscopic tears can develop in the tendon at the point where it attaches to the muscle (called the lateral epicondyle). Your body, in an effort to repair the tears, will often launch an inflammatory response. This can lead to discomfort and pain.

Despite the name, most of the folks who develop tennis elbow aren’t tennis players. So, if we’re not talking tennis phenoms, who’s at risk for developing tennis elbow? Professionals who need to keep an eye on their arms include butchers and cooks, mechanics, electricians, plumbers, farmers, harvesters, and painters. The NIH has also suggested that repetitive or constant computer or mouse use could lead or contribute to epicondylitis, [3] but it’s also possible for tennis elbow to develop for no apparent reason.

If you have pain in your elbow at certain movements, or notice that your grasp is weakening, you can see a health care provider to check whether you might have tennis elbow. If you experience pain near your elbow while bending back your wrist, along with more general pain while applying pressure to the ECRB or at the outside of your elbow, you may have tennis
elbow. The road to recovery from tennis elbow may include:

- Rebuilding your strength through physical therapy and eccentric exercise to gently stretch the muscles and tendons and help you regain your range of motion.
- Using over-the-counter pain reliever like naproxen, aspirin, or ibuprofen.
- Icing the area.
- Resting the elbow for two to three weeks (depending on what a doctor suggests).
- Wearing a brace.
- Getting shock wave therapy, which are sound waves sent into the elbow (considered experimental by some health care providers).

In more extreme or experimental cases, you could receive a cortisone injection into your elbow to decrease the pain, or your health care provider could recommend surgery to help repair the tendon and muscle attachment site.

But since as they say an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure, keep these tennis elbow prevention tips tucked in the back of your mind:

- Adjust any machinery or sporting equipment that you are using to fit your body ability, size and muscle strength.
- When working or on the court, focus on proper technique: keep an eye on your movements and form (or have a coach or supervisor check your form) to make sure your movements won’t lead to injury.
- Strengthen the muscles in your back, upper arm, and forearm.
- Decrease the pressure or use of your elbow if you begin to feel discomfort.
- If you feel that your work environment could lead to injury, in the U.S., you are protected under the Occupational Safety and Health Act (OSHA). For more information about contributing to a health and risk-free workplace, check out the OSHA website. They even list ergonomic principles and ergonomic solutions that can help you find ways to decrease the strain and physical stress of your job.

Hopefully this info serves you well!

Alice!
Category:
Nutrition & Physical Activity
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