About Lateral Epicondylitis

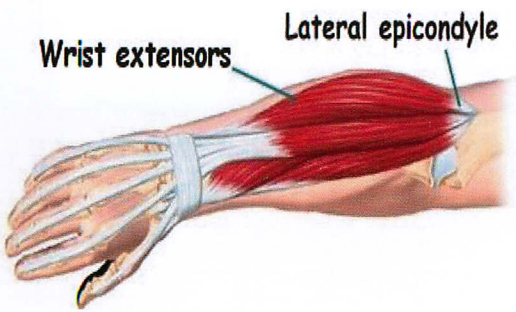
Elbow Anatomy

Lateral epicondylitis causes pain that starts on the outside bump of the elbow, the lateral epicondyle. The forearm muscles that bend the wrist back (the extensors) attach on the lateral epicondyle and are connected by a single tendon.

Muscle contractions pull on one end of a tendon. The other end of the tendon pulls on the bone, causing the bone to move.

When you bend your wrist back or grip with your hand, the wrist extensor muscles contract. The contracting muscles pull on the extensor tendon. The forces that pull on these tendons can build when you grip things, hit a tennis ball in a backhand swing in tennis, or do other similar actions.

Any activities that repeatedly stress the same forearm muscles can cause symptoms of tennis elbow.



What is Lateral Epicondylitis?

Lateral epicondylitis, better known as tennis elbow, is an inflammation of the extensor tendon of the forearm.

What Causes Lateral Epicondylitis?

Overuse of the muscles and tendons of the forearm and elbow are the most common reason people develop tennis elbow. Repeating some types of activities over and over again can put too much strain on the elbow tendons. These activities are not necessarily high-level sports competition. Hammering nails, picking up heavy buckets, or pruning shrubs can all cause the pain of tennis elbow.

Symptoms

Common symptoms of lateral epicondylitis include the following:

- Tenderness and pain that starts at the lateral epicondyle of the elbow and may spread down the forearm
- Pain usually gets worse when you bend your wrist backward, turn your palm upward, or hold something with a stiff wrist or straightened elbow
- Grasping items also makes the pain worse
- Sometimes the elbow feels stiff and won't straighten out completely

How Physical Therapy Can Help

Physical Therapy can help patients with lateral epicondylitis in a number of ways.

- Modalities (heat/ice, electric stimulation, ultrasound) to decrease pain/inflammation and promote healing
- Therapeutic exercises to strengthen wrist and elbow muscles
- Manual techniques to improve elbow range of motion (ROM)
- Personalized home exercise program to maintain strength/flexibility outside of therapy
- Education on body mechanics, technique modifications to prevent future recurrence

With physical therapy, many patients gain relief from their lateral epicondylitis symptoms and are able to return to full activity with improved strength and flexibility.