

Acing Tennis Elbow

If you play tennis, your odds of making Wimbledon are not all that great. You've got a lot better chance of developing tennis elbow. Tennis elbow is damage to the forearm muscles that usually occurs after using the arm repeatedly for an activity like swinging a tennis racket.

Most people develop tennis elbow from an incorrect backhand. If you bend your elbow during your backhand stroke, ball contact creates greater force on the muscles surrounding your elbow than if you keep your elbow straight. Other factors that contribute to tennis elbow include wrong grip, size, and string tension of the racket, and weak muscles in the hand, arm, and shoulder.

But you don't have to play a racket sport to get tennis elbow. You can develop the problem from raking leaves, gardening, golfing, bowling, playing baseball, or even tightly gripping a heavy briefcase.

What's It Feel Like?

At first, you may feel aching or soreness near the outside of your elbow or on the side of your forearm opposite your palm. If you continue

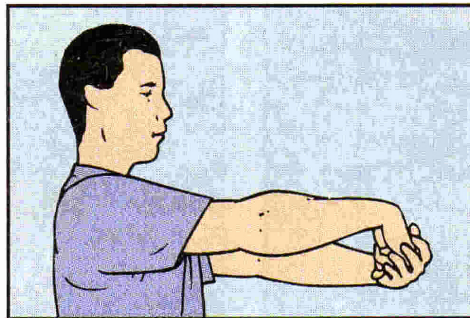


Figure 1. To stretch your forearm muscles while seated or standing, extend your arm straight in front of you with the palm down. Make a loose fist and use the opposite hand to pull the wrist down. Hold for 10 seconds, relax, and repeat five times. Do two to three times a day.

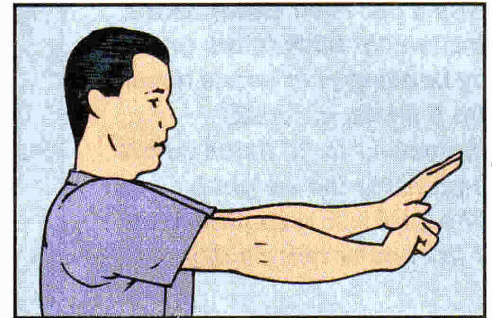


Figure 2. For forearm strength, hold your arm straight in front of you, palm down. Clench your fingers, bend your wrist up, and hold it tight. Using the other hand, try to push the hand down. Hold for 10 seconds, relax, and repeat five times. Slowly increase to 20 times, two to three times a day. Follow the same procedure with your elbow bent 90°.

Illustrations: Terry Boles

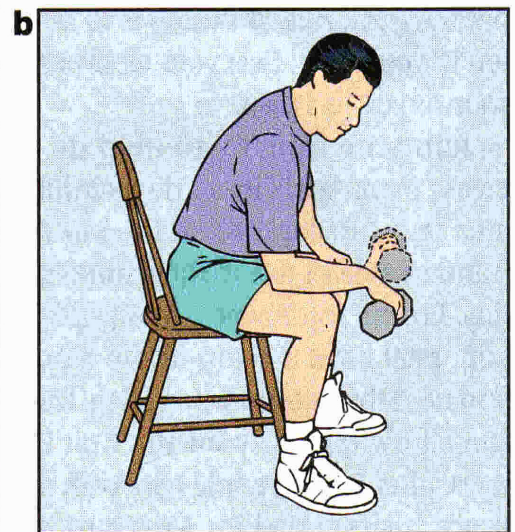
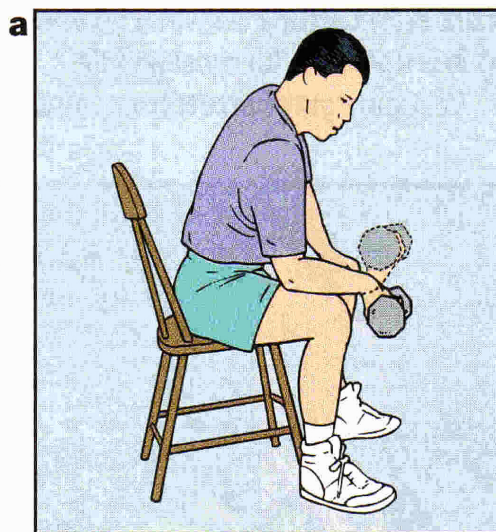


Figure 3. To do wrist curls, sit with your hand over your knee. With your palm up (a) and holding a 1- or 2-lb weight, bend your wrist up 10 times. Repeat with your palm down (b), extending your wrist up. Increase to two sets of 10 daily, then increase the weight by 1 lb. Repeat the process until you reach 5 to 7 lb.

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to play, these areas may become tender when you touch them, and the pain may travel down to your wrist.

You may have problems with everyday activities like shaking

hands, picking up a briefcase, or opening a door because the pain is so great. If you feel this type of pain, stop playing tennis, rest your arm, and see a doctor.

continued

Figure 4. Tie a 2-lb weight to the end of a rope. Then attach it to the middle of a broomstick or cane. Grasp the broomstick with your palms down, and slowly lift the weight by bending your wrists up. Then slowly lower the weight back to the ground by bending your wrists down. Do 5 times, gradually increasing to 20 times before increasing the weight by 1 lb. The goal is 20 repetitions of 7 lb once or twice a day.

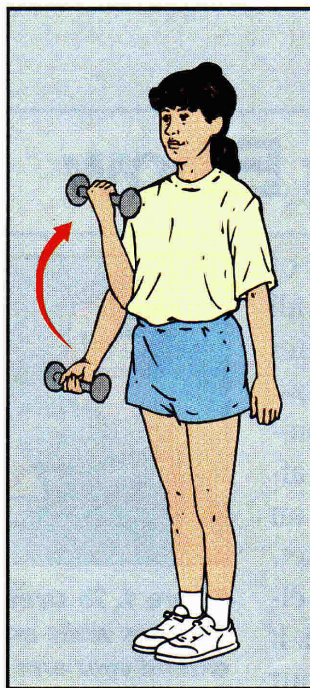
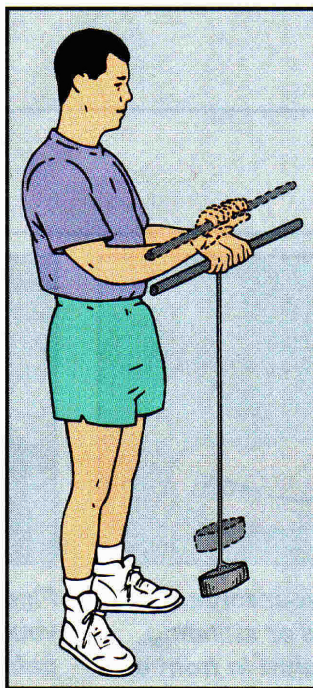


Figure 5. This elbow-flexion exercise strengthens your biceps and forearm muscles. Start with your arm at your side, your back straight, and your palm facing forward. Bending only your elbow, lift a 1- to 3-lb weight slowly. Then return to the starting position. Do three sets of 10 repetitions on each arm. If your arm fatigues before the seventh lift, switch to a lighter weight.

Rest and Recovery

The first step in treating tennis elbow is to rest from the painful activity for 4 to 6 weeks. Don't return to the tennis court until you are free of pain. A good rule of thumb is to listen to your body. Rest your elbow as soon as you feel pain.

Icing the injury can help decrease pain. Apply ice to the painful area in a circular motion for 5 to 7 minutes at least two to three times a day. Freeze some water in a paper cup, peel back the top of the cup, and hold the bottom when icing. Ice the elbow regularly for the first 5 days. After 5 days, apply heat with a moist heating pad for 15 minutes two to three times a day followed by massage for 5 minutes to increase circulation.

Your doctor may prescribe a tennis elbow strap to minimize the force to your elbow when you return to play. You wear this strap just below your elbow.

One of the most effective ways to find long-term relief from tennis elbow pain is to learn proper tennis technique—especially a good backhand. Tennis lessons not only will

help prevent further injury but will also help improve your game.

Also, have your racket—and its grip—sized for your strength and style of play by a tennis pro. A mid-sized racket strung between 50 and 55 lb is optimum for most people.

You can start stretching and

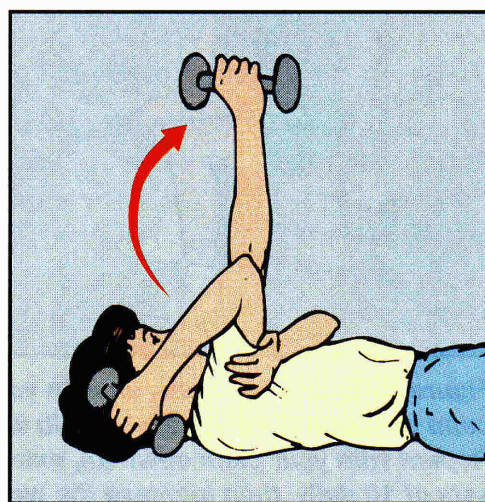


Figure 6. This elbow-extension lift strengthens your triceps muscles in the back of your upper arm. While lying on your back, flex your arm with your elbow pointing straight up, and hold the back of your upper arm with your opposite hand for support. With a 1- to 3-lb weight, extend your elbow completely, then slowly return to the starting position. Follow the repetition guidelines in figure 5.

strengthening exercises after the 5-day icing period. Stretching exercises (figure 1) increase flexibility of the damaged muscle. Strengthening exercises (figures 2 through 6) regain any strength lost during the rest period. Increased strength can also help prevent recurrence.

Another simple strengthening exercise is to squeeze a deflated tennis ball for 5 to 10 minutes two to three times a day. As your arm strengthens and remains pain-free, try an inflated tennis ball. If you feel pain during any of these exercises, stop immediately.

A Nice Return

Though it may take you out of your game, set, and match for a while, tennis elbow need not lay you up permanently. By resting your elbow and taking steps—such as stretching and strengthening—to treat the injury, you'll get back in the swing of things quickly. **FSM**

Remember: This information is not intended as a substitute for medical treatment. Before starting an exercise program, consult a physician.