

## Tennis Elbow: Treatment and Prevention

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One of the most common injuries for a tennis player is a condition called "**tennis elbow.**" Ironically, it is not the most painful or most disabling condition but it can produce enough discomfort to interfere with enjoyable or competitive playing.

Tennis elbow is caused by stress placed on the forearm muscles and tendons. Due to the nature of tennis, when a ball strikes the racquet, its force is transmitted along the forearm to the elbow. The tendons at the elbow become inflamed and later, scarred. Most people who develop this condition experience pain at the outer (lateral) side of the elbow. Other symptoms of tennis elbow are pain caused by lifting or gripping, discomfort with extending the forearm fully, and persistent pain that lasts for several weeks.

Rehabilitation for a mild form of this condition usually consists of **R.I.C.E.**:

**Rest:** Complete rest from tennis until pain subsides. This allows for the inflammation to subside and helps to promote healing.

**Ice:** Ice 2-3 times daily for 15 minutes each session to calm down irritation.

**Compression:** An ace bandage or a compression wrap to calm the area of irritation.

**Elevation:** To allow for a decrease in inflammation.

For moderate cases of tennis elbow, taking an anti-inflammatory such as ibuprofen, in addition to performing the **RICE** treatment, will help address the inflammation and the pain while resting the injury. Also, massage and therapeutic exercise can alleviate symptoms. However, the most severe cases of tennis elbow need to be addressed by a medical doctor who may advise corticosteroid injections, which dramatically reduce inflammation, but they cannot be used long-term because of potentially damaging side effects.

After recovery, routine warm-up involving stretching and strengthening exercises should be continued. Always begin your exercise program with a stretch. During stretching of the forearm, first flex the elbow, and then flex the wrist to a comfortable position as to begin the stretch, then extend the elbow with the wrist in a preset comfortable position. Hold the stretch for 20-30 seconds and repeat. Strengthening exercises include the **hand squeeze**; hold a tennis ball in your palm. Squeeze the ball firmly and hold for 3 seconds, then relax. Repeat until your forearm is fatigued. If this exercise is difficult at first, start with a foam ball, or exercise balls found in sporting goods or therapy clinics and progress to a tennis ball. Another exercise you can perform is the **wrist curl**. Start off with no weight, with your forearm resting on a table, and your palm facing up, slowly bend your wrist as high as possible and slowly lower it down. Repeat 10 - 15 repetitions; if this is easy add a one-pound weight. Begin with 2 sets of 10-15 repetitions, when this becomes easy increase the weight in one-pound increments. Most important, do not do the exercise if it causes pain.

**Remember:** Always consult your physician or physical therapist before beginning an exercise program.

Modifications in equipment can also help prevent injury. Balls should be fresh, regular duty balls and not dead or wet because a heavy weighted ball will produce more force on the racquet. There is no evidence that supports one racquet over another, however, the lighter, medium-flex;

evenly balanced racquets may be best. Stringing patterns do not matter, but mild to moderate tension on the strings is recommended. Finally, correct grip size will produce less stress.

A final important factor in preventing tennis elbow and many other injuries is ensuring that proper tennis biomechanics are followed. Consulting your certified tennis teaching professional is an important part of the preventative conditioning program and cannot be overlooked.

**If you have Tennis Elbow or any other physical limitations that Pacific Physical Therapy can help you with, Call Us at 310-796-1338.**