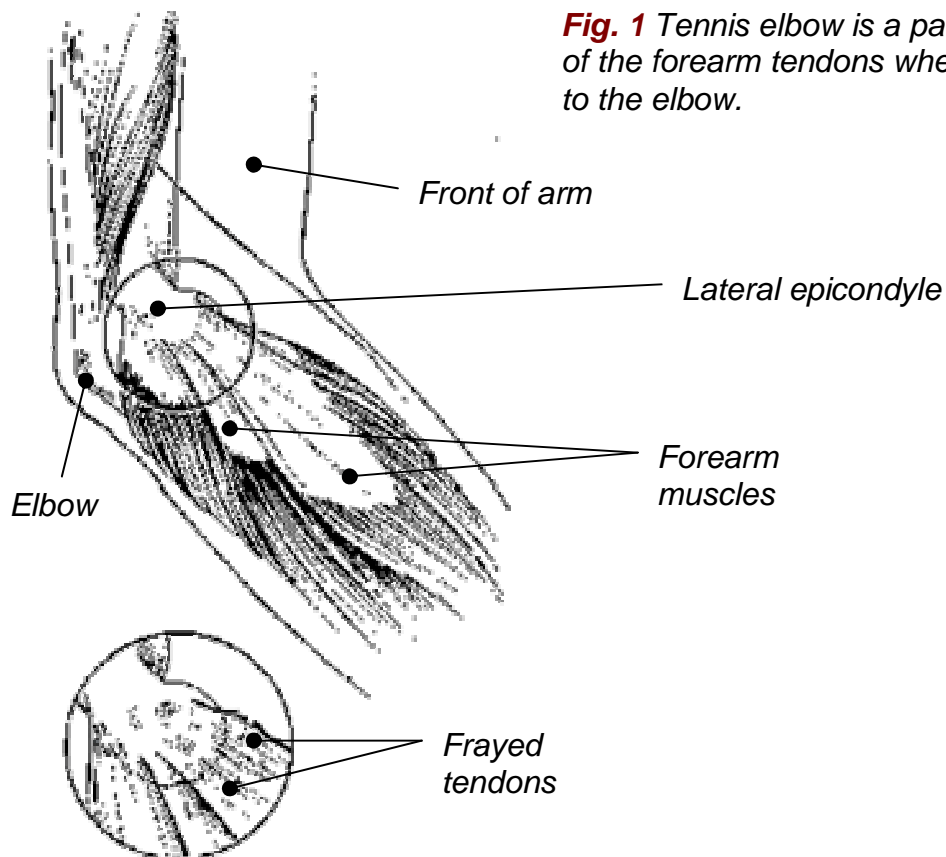


LATERAL EPICONDYLITIS, or TENNIS ELBOW, is a painful condition of the tendons that attach the muscles in the forearm to the elbow. Despite its name, many people with tennis elbow do not play tennis.

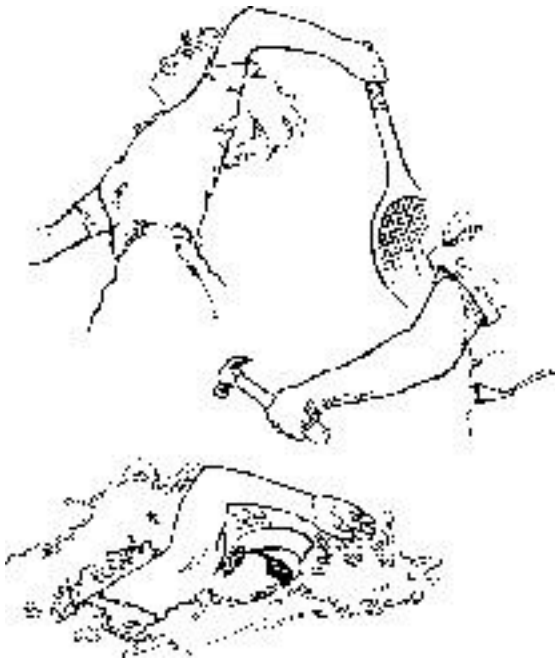
Causes. The most common cause of tennis elbow is overuse of the forearm and wrist muscles. Degeneration of the tendons (tissue that connects muscle to bone) occurs where they attach to the outside of the elbow. This degeneration can cause the tendons to become painful (Fig. 1). Window washing, painting, and using a hammer are examples of activities that can cause or worsen tennis elbow. (Fig. 2). Tennis elbow also can be caused by a direct blow to the outside of the elbow.



Symptoms. The main symptoms are elbow pain and weakness. The pain might spread below your elbow, and your grip strength may be decreased. You may have tenderness over the part of the elbow called the lateral epicondyle, which is located on the outer side.

Examination. Your doctor will examine your elbow and locate the most tender area. He will also test your strength and take x-rays. Occasionally, a bone spur will be present (Fig. 3). An additional test that may be helpful is magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), which shows the bone, tendons, and muscles.

Fig 2 Activities that may cause tennis elbow



Treatment Non-operative treatment relieves the symptoms in most people with tennis elbow. However, it is important to understand that you will not get better overnight. It often takes many months of treatment before you completely improve. To help the tendons heal, you should avoid activities that cause the pain. Rest, anti-inflammatory medication such as aspirin and ibuprofen, and application of ice are the treatments to be tried first to relieve symptoms. Exercises to strengthen and stretch the muscles of the forearm should be part of your rehabilitation. These exercises must be done at least 2 to 3 times every day until symptoms have resolved.

Even then you may still need to continue doing them once daily. Your doctor can show you how to place a compression band around your forearm. This band can relieve the tension from the tendons where they attach to the elbow.

One of the most effective treatments for tennis elbow is an injection of cortisone (a strong anti-inflammatory medicine) around the inflamed tendons. Several injections are often needed before you can get lasting relief of the symptoms. After you have had a cortisone injection, you still need to take anti-inflammatory medicine and participate in rehabilitation exercises. Remember, it can take a long time for tendonitis to get better. You should avoid the temptation to resume all activities as soon as your symptoms begin to go away because this often causes your symptoms to return.

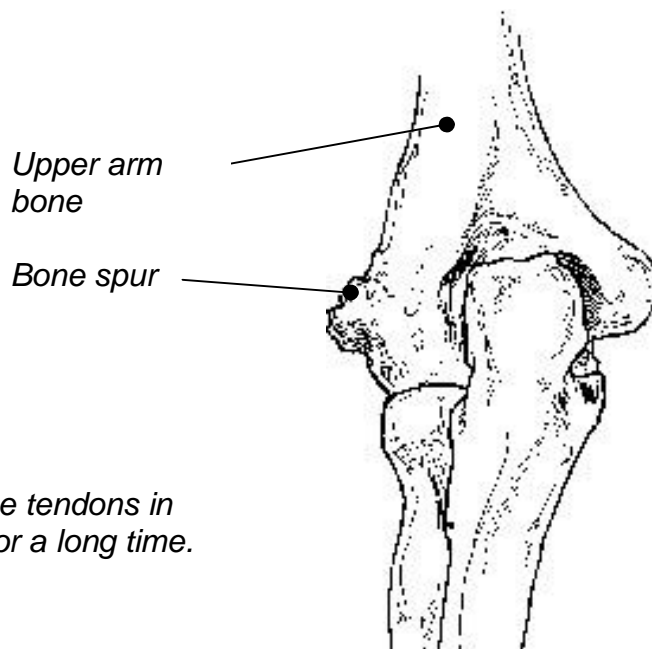


Fig. 3 A bone spur may form if the tendons in your elbow have been inflamed for a long time.

Prevention. Prevention of tennis elbow is very important. Stretching and strengthening exercises are the best preventive measures. Changes in equipment, such as a lighter hammer or tennis racket, can also help.

Surgery. If tennis elbow does not get better within 6 months after beginning appropriate treatment, you might need surgery to relieve pain and to allow you to return to work or sports. After surgery, you will begin a special exercise program to increase muscle strength in your forearm.

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