



**BAY AREA ORTHOPEDIC**  
SURGERY & SPORTS MEDICINE

## **Golfer's Elbow (Medial Epicondylitis)**



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The pain of golfer's elbow occurs primarily where the tendons of the forearm muscles attach to the bony bump on the inside of the elbow (medial epicondyle). By contrast, the pain of tennis elbow usually occurs at the bony bump on the outside of the elbow (lateral epicondyle).

### **Definition**

Golfer's elbow is pain and inflammation on the inner side of your elbow, where the tendons of your forearm muscles attach to the bony bump on the inside of your elbow. The pain may spread into your forearm and wrist.

Golfer's elbow — also known as medial epicondylitis — is similar to tennis elbow. But it occurs on the inside — rather than the outside — of your elbow. And it's not limited to golfers. Tennis players and others who repeatedly use their wrists or clench their fingers also can develop golfer's elbow.

The pain of golfer's elbow doesn't have to keep you off the course or away from your favorite activities. With rest and appropriate treatment, you can get back into the swing of things.

# Symptoms

## Golfer's elbow is characterized by:

- **Pain and tenderness** on the inner side of your elbow. Sometimes the pain extends along the inner side of your forearm.
- **Stiffness.** Your elbow may feel stiff, and it may hurt to make a fist.
- **Weakness.** You may have weakness in your hands and wrists.
- **Numbness or tingling.** Many people with golfer's elbow experience numbness or a tingling sensation that radiates into one or more fingers — usually the ring and little fingers.

The pain of golfer's elbow may appear suddenly or gradually. The pain may get worse when you:

- Swing a golf club or racket
- Squeeze or pitch a ball
- Shake hands
- Turn a doorknob
- Pick up something with your palm down
- Flex your wrist toward your forearm

## When to see a doctor

Consult your doctor if rest, ice and over-the-counter (OTC) pain relievers don't ease your elbow pain and tenderness. Seek immediate care if:

- Your elbow is hot and inflamed and you have a fever
- You can't bend your elbow
- Your elbow looks deformed
- You suspect you've broken a bone

## Causes

Golfer's elbow is caused by damage to the muscles and tendons that control your wrist and fingers. The damage is typically related to excess or repetitive stress — especially forceful wrist and finger motions. Sometimes golfer's elbow begins after a sudden force to the elbow or wrist. Many activities can lead to golfer's elbow, including:

- **Golf.** Gripping or swinging the clubs incorrectly can take a toll on your muscles and tendons.
- **Racket sports.** Excessive topspin can hurt your elbow. Using a racket that's too small, heavy or tightly strung also can lead to injury.
- **Throwing sports.** Improper pitching technique in baseball or softball can be another culprit.
- **Weight training.** Lifting weights using improper technique, such as curling the wrists during a biceps exercise, can lead to overload of the elbow muscles and tendons.
- **Other activities.** Painting, raking, hammering, chopping wood, typing and other repetitive wrist, hand or arm movements can result in golfer's elbow as well.

## Risk factors

Golfer's elbow is most common in men ages 20 to 49 — but the condition can affect anyone

who repetitively stresses the wrists or fingers.

## Complications

Left untreated, golfer's elbow can cause:

- Chronic elbow pain
- A limited range of motion
- A lasting, fixed bend (contracture) in your elbow

## Preparing for your appointment

If you have signs and symptoms common to golfer's elbow that don't improve with ice, OTC pain relievers and rest, make an appointment with your doctor. After an initial exam, your doctor may refer you to a sports medicine specialist.

## Tests and diagnosis

Golfer's elbow is usually diagnosed based on your medical history and a physical exam. To evaluate pain and stiffness, the doctor may apply pressure to the affected area or ask you to move your elbow, wrist and fingers in various ways.

An X-ray can help the doctor rule out other possible causes of elbow pain, such as a fracture or arthritis. Rarely, more comprehensive imaging studies — such as magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) — are performed.

## Treatments and drugs

The sooner you begin treatment, the sooner you'll be able to return to your usual activities.

**Rest.** Put your golf game or other repetitive activities on hold until the pain is gone. If you return to the links too soon, you may make it worse.

**Ice the affected area.** Apply ice packs to your elbow for 15 to 20 minutes at a time, four times a day for several days. To protect your skin, wrap the ice packs in a thin towel. It may also help to massage the inner elbow with ice for five minutes at a time, two to three times a day.

**Stretch and strengthen the affected area.** Your doctor may suggest specific stretching and strengthening exercises. Physical or occupational therapy can be helpful, too.

**Reduce the load on your elbow.** Wrap your elbow with an elastic bandage or use a forearm strap. And remember to maintain a rigid wrist position during all lifting activities.

**Take an over-the-counter pain reliever.** Try ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin, others), naproxen (Aleve), acetaminophen (Tylenol, others) or aspirin.

**Consider other medications.** If over-the-counter pain relievers aren't effective, your doctor may recommend a cortisone injection to reduce pain and swelling.

**Gradually return to your usual activities.** When you're no longer in pain, practice the arm motions of your sport or activity. Review your golf or tennis swing with an instructor and make adjustments if needed.

Depending on the severity of your condition, the pain may linger for several

months — even if you take it easy and follow instructions to exercise your arm. Sometimes the pain returns or becomes chronic. While you're recovering, remember the importance of rest. Sneaking in a round of golf before your elbow heals won't help you feel better. It may prolong your recovery.

## Prevention

You can take steps to prevent golfer's elbow:

**Strengthen your forearm muscles.** Use light weights or squeeze a tennis ball. Even simple exercises can help your muscles better absorb the energy of sudden physical stress.

**Stretch before your activity.** Walk or jog for a few minutes to warm up your muscles. Then take time for gentle stretching before you begin your game.

**Fix your form.** If you golf, ask an instructor to check your grip and swing technique. The golf swing is a whole body swing, from the legs up. Sometimes, problems with your swing will cause you to use your wrist muscles more than you should, leading to overload. If you play tennis, ask an instructor to check your technique for hitting a forehand. You may need to decrease your topspin. The racket size and tension of the strings are important, too.

**Lift smartly.** When lifting anything — including free weights — keep your wrist rigid and stable to reduce the force transmitted to your elbow.

It's also important to know when to rest. At the first sign of elbow pain, take a break. In addition to self-care measures, time off is often needed to promote healing.

*Information courtesy of the Mayo Clinic. Further information can be found at [www.mayoclinic.com](http://www.mayoclinic.com).*