

PHYSIO FOR TENNIS ELBOW

Patient Information



Here's a detailed, step-by-step explanation of what a **physical therapy (PT) program for tennis elbow (lateralepicondylitis)** typically involves:

Physical Therapy for Tennis Elbow: Your Roadmap to Recovery

Science-Based Rehabilitation for Lasting Healing

Goal of PT:

Not just pain relief – **rebuild tendon strength** and **restore normal function** while teaching you how to prevent reinjury.

Phase 1: Reduce Pain & Inflammation (Weeks 1–3)

(Focus: Protect, calm, and gently mobilize)

1. Activity Modification:

- **Stop aggravating movements:** Avoid repetitive gripping, lifting (especially palm-down), typing with force, or twisting motions (e.g., wringing towels).
- **Ergonomic adjustments:** Use padded tools, lighter utensils, or voice-to-text software.

2. Ice & Compression:

- **Ice massage:** Freeze water in a paper cup, peel the rim, and rub ice directly over the sore outer elbow for 3–5 mins (2x/day).
- **Compression sleeve:** Wear a lightweight elbow band during daytime activities (not while sleeping).

3. Gentle Mobility Exercises:

- **Wrist circles:** 10 circles clockwise/counter-clockwise, 2x/day.
- **Elbow bends:** Slowly bend/extend elbow 10 times, 2x/day (keep wrist relaxed).
- **Goal:** Prevent stiffness without straining the tendon.

Phase 2: Strengthen & Rebuild (Weeks 3–8)

(Focus: Eccentric loading – the GOLD STANDARD for tendon healing)

1. Eccentric Wrist Exercises (Most critical!):

- **What "eccentric" means:** Slowly lengthening the muscle *under control*.
- **How to do it:**

Sit with forearm supported on a table, palm facing **down**.

Hold a light weight (e.g., 1 lb / 0.5 kg dumbbell or water bottle).

Use your **other hand** to lift your wrist upward.

Slowly lower the weight (take 3–5 seconds) using only your sore arm.

- **Sets:** 3 sets of 15 reps, **once daily** (allow 24 hrs rest between sessions).
- **Progress:** Increase weight only when movement feels *easy* (never painful).

1. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ap9jSCn-Res>

Grip Strengthening:

- **Soft ball squeezes:** Hold a stress ball or towel roll. Squeeze 5 secs, relax 5 secs.
- **Reps:** 10–15 squeezes, 2x/day.

2. ****Forearm Stretches (Gentle!):****

- **Palm-down stretch:** Extend sore arm straight, palm down. Use other hand to gently press fingers toward floor. Hold 15 secs.
- **Palm-up stretch:** Same position, palm up. Gently pull fingers back. Hold 15 secs.
- **Do:** 3 reps each, 2x/day. **Never stretch into sharp pain!**

Phase 3: Functional Training (Weeks 8–12+)

(Focus: Prepare for daily tasks/sports)

1. **Simulated Activities:**

- Practice pain-free versions of:
 - Turning doorknobs (use whole arm, not just wrist).
 - Pouring from a pitcher (keep elbow bent close to body).
 - Using a screwdriver (rotate from shoulder, not wrist).

2. **Sport-Specific Drills (if applicable):**

- Tennis/golf: Shadow swings with **light racket/club** (focus on smooth motion).
- Weightlifting: Re-learn lifting form (elbows in, neutral wrists).

3. ****Advanced Strengthening:****

- **Pronation/supination:** Hold hammer handle; slowly rotate palm up/down.
- **Banded resistance:** Attach elastic band to doorknob; pull toward you (palm up/down).

What Your PT Might Also Use

Technique	Purpose	What to Expect
Manual Therapy	Soft tissue release, joint mobility	PT massages forearm muscles or gently moves elbow/wrist joints. Reduces tightness.
Dry Needling	Relieve muscle knots (triggerpoints)	Fine needles inserted into tight forearm muscles. Can reduce referral pain.
Taping	Support tendon, improve mechanics	Kinesiology tape applied from forearm to wrist. Reduces strain during activity.
Ultrasound	Deep heat (controversial efficacy)	Warm gel + sound head glides over tendon. May promote blood flow in early phases.

Key Rules for Success

1. "No Pain, No Gain" is **WRONG**:



- **Safe zone:** Mild discomfort (2–3/10 pain) during exercise is okay.



- **Stop immediately if:** Pain is sharp, throbbing, or exceeds 4/10.

1. **Consistency > Intensity:**

- 10 mins daily beats 60 mins once a week!

2. **Progress SLOWLY:**

- Increase weight/reps only when current load feels **easy for 2 straight sessions**.

3. ****Communicate with Your PT**:**

- Adjust exercises if they flare up pain.

How Long Until Improvement?

- **Pain reduction:** 4–6 weeks (with strict activity modification).

- **Functional improvement:** 8–12 weeks.
- **Full recovery:** 3–6 months (for severe cases).



Without PT, tennis elbow often drags on for 6–18 months. PT cuts recovery time *in half* for most people.

Don'ts for Tennis Elbow



- Don't ignore pain and "push through."



- Don't do aggressive stretching (overstretching harms tendons).



- Don't return to sports too soon (wait until cleared by PT).

Why PT Works: It stimulates collagen remodeling – literally *rebuilding* your tendon's strength from the inside out. Stick with it!



Source: Based on 2023 clinical guidelines from the *American Physical Therapy Association* and *Journal of Orthopaedic & Sports Physical Therapy*.

Always work with a licensed physical therapist for a personalized plan.