

Do Tennis Stars Get Tennis Elbow?



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Wimbledon is upon us and we all wait with baited breath to see how far a Brit can go this year. We are all used to the highs and the lows of Wimbledon fortnight and for some all other activities are put on hold. However one question that I am often asked is "why do the professionals never seem to have tennis elbow?" Hopefully by the end of this article you may understand more about the condition and perhaps why we don't hear about the stars having a problem.

What is Tennis Elbow?

The term "tennis elbow" is used to describe pain and stiffness on the outside of the elbow. True tennis elbow is caused by damage to the large tendon that then divides into a number of smaller tendons which extend or lift up the wrist. This big tendon – the common extensor tendon – originates from the bony point on the outside of the elbow. Where there is injury or damage to that tendon the pain is perceived on the outside of the elbow, and sometimes into the back of the forearm.

Who gets tennis elbow?

Tennis elbow can affect all sorts of people in all walks of life – it is not purely the domain of the sportsman or woman in their whites! In fact many who experience tennis elbow have scarcely picked up a racquet in their lives!

What Causes Tennis Elbow

In this section I have tried to give examples of contributing factors to tennis elbow that affect both players and non players. **Overuse** e.g. sudden increase in frequency of playing tennis, enthusiastic DIY. **Twisting** e.g. placing spin on the shot, excessive use of a screw driver. **Gripping too tightly** e.g. incorrect grip size, using scissors excessively. **Prolonged gripping** e.g. increasing intensity of training, driving long distances.

Direct injury e.g. a blow or knock to the outside of the elbow.

What does Tennis Elbow feel like?

You will more than likely feel **PAIN** and **STIFFNESS** on the outside of the elbow. Sometimes the **PAIN** will develop into the muscles along the back of the forearm.

Other symptoms may include **INTERRUPTED SLEEP** due to pain, **STIFFNESS** particularly in the mornings or after periods of inactivity, **PAIN ON GRIPPING**, or shaking hands.

You may also experience **PAIN** in the neck or shoulder – it is important this is investigated – it could be due to compensatory movements, or it may be the primary cause of your symptoms causing pain in the area or "tennis Elbow". Your physiotherapist can examine you and establish the cause.

What can I do to help myself?

Only use your arm until you start to feel pain – your body is telling you to STOP.

Avoid any repeated gripping or twisting movements.

Try using an icepack on your elbow – wrap a small bag of frozen peas in a damp tea towel and place on the affected area for 10-15mins. This can be repeated 3 times a day.

When lifting a heavy object such as a full kettle lift with the palm of your hand upwards – this decreases the effort on the muscles on the back of the wrist and elbow.

Book a lesson with your tennis pro. – check your technique, weight of racquet and your grip size.

Decrease the frequency and intensity of your tennis and build up gradually as your symptoms resolve.

When should I seek Help?

If your pain is severe, your sleep is disturbed by pain, you have loss of feeling or weakness, you should see you doctor or physiotherapist to exclude any serious injury or pathology.

If your pain is mild but not improving with rest and the other self help tips then consult a physiotherapist or GP.

What treatments are available?

NSAIDS – non steroidal anti inflammatory drugs or creams. These may help decrease pain and inflammation. You should seek advice from your doctor or pharmacist. They are not suitable for use by everyone.

STEROID INJECTIONS – studies have shown that you may initially be able to use your arm more, and experience less pain than with other treatments; however they may not help in the long term (ref.1,2,3).

PHYSIOTHERAPY – local treatment including manipulation, electrotherapy and specific exercises have been shown to be of benefit. Studies have found that specific exercise can reduce pain, and those patients who were shown specific exercises, and had their elbow manipulated by a physiotherapist, felt better and were likely to take less painkillers than people who had no treatment. It was also shown that physiotherapy worked better than steroid injections in the long term. (ref.4)

Other treatments that may be of benefit:

ACUPUNCTURE, ARM BRACES, SURGERY

So, do tennis professionals get tennis elbow?

Well the simple answer is – yes they do – Sampras, Kafelnikov, Martin – have apparently all suffered with this condition to name but a few.

However the fitness training and technique of tennis professional is generally much better than the average tennis player. They have the benefit of excellent medical and technical support and they know which grip positions make a player more prone to the injury. So continue to enjoy your tennis – and if you are suffering from this painful and frustrating condition, console yourself – you have something in common with the tennis greats!

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