

Tennis Elbow Starter Guide

What it actually is. Why rest keeps failing you. What to do instead.

What Is Tennis Elbow?

Tennis elbow — clinically known as lateral elbow tendinopathy — is pain on the outer side of your elbow where the forearm extensor muscles attach to the bone. Despite the name, most people who get it have never played tennis. It is one of the most common overuse conditions affecting the elbow, and it is frequently misunderstood.

Tennis elbow is not a tear (in most cases). It is not permanent damage. It is a tendon that has been asked to do more than it is currently capable of doing.

The Core Problem: Demand > Capacity

Your tendon is struggling to keep up with what you are asking of it.

This could be from a sudden spike in use — a weekend project, new job task, sport change.

Or from chronic under-loading: the tendon never built enough capacity for everyday demands.

Either way, the solution is the same: build what is missing.

What Pain Actually Means

Pain in a tendinopathy is real — but it does not mean the tendon is being damaged every time it hurts. Tendon pain is a warning signal, not a damage report. It is the tendon saying: "I am not ready for this yet."

This is one of the most important things to understand, because the instinct to rest and protect can actually make things worse over time. A tendon that does not receive load does not build capacity. And a tendon with low capacity hurts more easily.

Pain Is Feedback — Not Failure

Pain during loading does not mean you are causing damage.

Avoiding all pain does not allow the tendon to heal.

The goal is to find the right amount of load — not too much, not too little.

Your Three Zones

Use these zones to guide every activity — exercise, work tasks, and daily life. Where are you right now?

□ GREEN	□ YELLOW	□ RED
No pain, or 0–2/10 during and after activity.	Mild discomfort 3–4/10. Settles within 24 hours.	Pain 5+/10, worsening during use, or still elevated next day.
□ Keep going. Gradually increase load.	⚠ Continue with caution. Adjust if needed.	□ Reduce load. Return to isometrics. Reassess.

The zone you are in changes day to day. Check in with yourself before starting any activity that uses your forearm, wrist, or grip.

Where to Start: Isometric Loading

When the tendon is irritable and painful, the safest way to start loading is with isometric exercises. These are "still" contractions — the muscle works hard without the joint moving. Tendons tolerate this well, even when they are reactive, and these exercises are often immediately pain-relieving.

Starter Exercise: Wrist Extensor Isometric

Sit at a table. Place your forearm on the table, palm facing down, wrist just over the edge. Place your other hand on top of your wrist to add gentle resistance. Press your wrist upward against your hand. Hold for 30–45 seconds. Repeat 3–5 times. Do this 2–3 times per day. Pain should stay at or below 4/10. This is your starting point — not the finish line.

Do these daily. Consistency matters far more than intensity at this stage. Most people notice a meaningful reduction in pain within 2–3 weeks of regular isometric loading.

What to Avoid Early On

Some movements and habits make lateral elbow tendinopathy significantly worse, especially early in recovery. These are worth knowing — not to avoid them forever, but to manage them while the tendon is still irritable.

- Heavy gripping with a bent wrist — e.g., carrying bags, shaking hands forcefully
- Repetitive wrist extension under load — e.g., screwdriving, typing on a raised keyboard
- Sudden spikes in forearm use — e.g., a full day of yardwork after weeks of rest
- Forceful static gripping — e.g., holding a heavy tool for a prolonged period

A temporary elbow brace (counterforce strap) worn during activity can reduce symptom provocation early on. Ask your clinician if this is appropriate for you.

What Comes Next

Once your pain is consistently in the Green or Yellow zone during daily activities, you are ready to progress to strengthening. This means moving from isometrics to slow, controlled resistance training — exercises that directly challenge the tendon with load and movement.

Phase	What You Are Doing	Typical Timeline
Calm Pain	Isometrics, load management, activity modification	Weeks 1–4
Build Capacity	Progressive resistance training for wrist extensors	Weeks 4–12
Return to Activity	Sport, work, and high-demand tasks with full load tolerance	Weeks 8–16+

Realistic Timelines

Tennis elbow is notoriously slow to respond — but it does respond. Here is what to expect:

- Pain reduction: Most people notice improvement in 4–8 weeks of consistent loading
- Functional recovery: Return to full daily activity usually takes 8–12 weeks
- Full sport or high-demand activity: 16–24 weeks in some cases
- Setbacks are normal: A bad day or a flare does not mean you are starting over

The most common reason tennis elbow does not resolve is inconsistency — either doing too much too soon, or stopping when pain settles instead of continuing to build capacity.

Remember

You do not need to wait until it is completely pain-free to start loading.

The tendon needs stimulus to adapt. Appropriate discomfort is part of the process.

"Build what is strong, not fix what is wrong."

Consistency over intensity. Show up. The tendon responds.

This guide is the starting point. Your clinician will help you progress through each phase based on how your tendon responds.