

The two most common elbow problems I see

By Bob Cairo | Special to the Coastal Point
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Elbow pain, whether it's tennis elbow or golf elbow, isn't confined to players of those sports, or any sports. Bob Cairo offers some insight into the two most common elbow problems he sees as a physical therapist.

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The summer season may have come to an end here on Delmarva, but we are very lucky. Our beautiful fall season allows us to continue to enjoy many outdoor activities. With so many of us more active than usual during the summer, and the prospect of those beautiful fall and early winter

months meaning there's more to come, I have been seeing an interesting trend: Many people are coming to see me for help with elbow problems.

What are the two most common elbow issues I'm seeing? Tennis elbow and golf elbow. But do you know the differences between them, and does that really mean you have to play those two sports to suffer from these uncomfortable problems? The answers may surprise you, and because these are such common issues, we are going to take a look at them together, so you or someone you care about will have a better understanding.

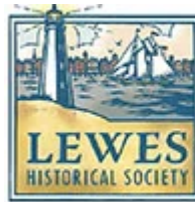
Is tennis elbow something only tennis players have to worry about? Hardly. The reality is the rest of us have just as much risk, because this painful problem usually results from work-related or daily activities.

Tennis elbow is also called lateral epicondylitis. It strikes when the tendons that join the forearm muscles with the outside of the elbow become inflamed. Remember, tendons are connective tissues that are quite flexible. That said, however, they don't have as much give as ligaments.

You are at risk for tennis elbow if you are regularly involved in daily activities that require repeated arm motion. Jobs that require lifting or even being on a computer all day often lead to this unpleasant problem. This is also true if you are involved in a daily activity that involves repetitive movements. Sports like baseball, and others that involve throwing movements, put you at risk, too.

There are some symptoms that typically point to tennis elbow. Often, people suffering from tennis elbow have pain that keeps occurring right beneath the bend of the elbow, in the outside of the upper arm. There's a high probability that you'll experience pain in your hands as well. Many people say they notice the pain when they are trying to do something like opening a door or even a jar. The discomfort is also quite often noticeable when you straighten your wrist as well. Another typical symptom is if you are feeling pain from lifting or bending your arm.

So, what about golfers' elbow? You guessed it — golfer's elbow isn't just about golf. Many golfers do have a problem with this painful syndrome, but it can also be a painful problem in a variety of sports, such as baseball, softball, or with football players who are tossing or pitching the ball using a poor technique.



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Weightlifters who use improper techniques often suffer from golfers' elbow, too. And if you're getting into playing after having time off or are a first-timer, it's particularly a risk, because it can result from weak or untrained muscles.

Doctors refer to golfers' elbow as medial epicondylitis. It's an inflammation of the tendons that occurs where your forearm muscles connect to a bony bump that's located on the inside of your elbow. It can be tricky, because it can come on quite suddenly or gradually.

Some of the symptoms people can experience include pain and tenderness from the inflammation on the inside of the elbow. The pain can also spread down your arm. Some people experience stiffness in the problem elbow. Another often resulting symptom is weakness in your hand and wrist. Yet another unpleasant potential symptom is a sense of tingling and even numbness that can involve your fingers. It's usually the ring and little fingers where the numbness and tingling are experienced.

Golfer's elbow is most often the result of overuse. Repeated movements that are the source of repeated stress to the area often result in this painful condition.

When you compare tennis elbow with golfers' elbow the biggest difference is actually the location. Tennis elbow involves the outside of the elbow, and even the forearm. Golfers' elbow involves the inner side of the elbow and arm. One thing is for sure — neither one of them is very pleasant.

So, what do you do? By now, you know what I'm going to tell you next. Don't ignore your problem and don't self-diagnose. Go see your doctor. There's a good chance your doctor will send you to a physical therapist to help you recover from either of these problems with a physical therapy program. Your physical therapist will likely also work with you to help you understand what you can do to help avoid having your problem come back again.

As is always the case, my goal is to keep our dialogue going on the issues that might be troubling you because I want to help you find a path forward that will let you live your best life.

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