

Distal Biceps Tendon Repair: What You Need to Know

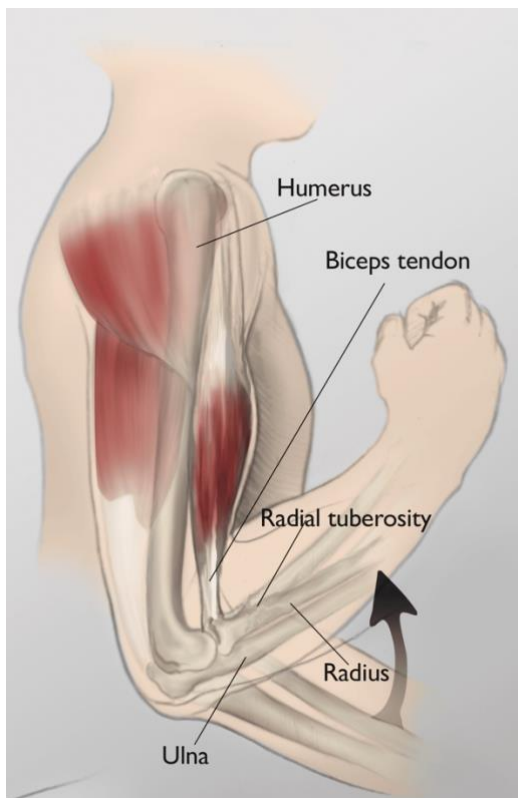
The distal biceps tendon attaches the biceps muscle to the radius bone near the elbow. It can rupture due to a sudden force, like lifting a heavy object, causing pain, weakness, and a bulge in the upper arm. When the tendon tears completely or significantly, surgery may be recommended to restore strength and function, especially for active individuals. **Distal biceps tendon repair** reattaches the tendon to the bone. Below, we explain the surgery, recovery, potential complications, and expected outcomes to help you feel prepared.

Description of the Surgery

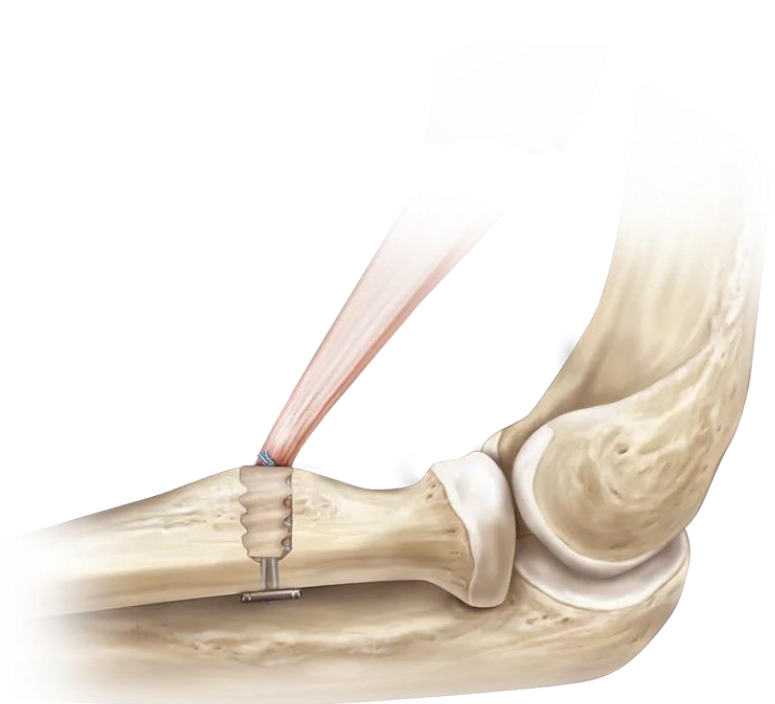
Distal biceps tendon repair re-anchors the torn tendon to its original attachment site on the radius:

- The surgeon typically uses general anesthesia or regional anesthesia (numbing the arm) to keep you comfortable.
- A small incision (2-3 inches) is made in the front of the forearm near the elbow. In some cases, a second small incision may be made higher on the arm to retrieve the retracted tendon.
- The surgeon locates the torn tendon end, trims any damaged tissue, and reattaches it to the radius bone using sutures, anchors, or a small metal button drilled into the bone. This secures the tendon firmly in place.
- The incision(s) are closed with stitches, and a splint or brace is applied to protect the repair and keep the elbow bent at about 90 degrees.
- The procedure takes 1 hour and is outpatient, meaning you can go home the same day.

The surgery is most effective when performed within a few weeks of the injury, before the tendon retracts too far or scars down.



Source: aaos.org



Source: arthrex.com

What to Expect During Recovery

Recovery focuses on protecting the tendon repair while gradually restoring motion and strength. Here's a general timeline:

- **Immediately After Surgery:**

Your arm will be in a splint or brace, keeping the elbow bent. Mild pain, swelling, or bruising is normal, manageable with prescribed pain medication or over-the-counter options like ibuprofen. Keep your arm elevated to reduce swelling. Work on finger motion exercises (from a tight fist to full extension) to prevent stiffness.

- **First 1-2 Weeks:**

The splint stays on, and stitches are typically removed within 10-14 days. You'll avoid lifting or straightening the arm, though gentle finger and shoulder movements may be encouraged to prevent stiffness. A referral will be placed for physical therapy to begin a progressive motion and strengthening program.

- **Weeks 2-6:**

Physical therapy typically begins with work on gentle motion exercises through the elbow. You'll still avoid lifting anything heavier than a cup of coffee.

- **Months 2-3:**

Therapy progresses to rebuild strength, and most patients resume light daily activities (e.g., typing, dressing, grooming). Heavy lifting or strenuous use remains off-limits until the tendon is stronger (after 3 months).

- **Full Recovery:**

Complete healing takes 4-6 months. You can typically return to heavy lifting, sports, or manual work by 4-6 months, with full biceps strength often restored by 6 months.

Follow your surgeon's instructions on bracing, therapy, and activity restrictions for the best results.

Potential Complications

Distal biceps tendon repair is generally successful, but risks exist. These are rare and often treatable:

- **Infection:** Redness, swelling, or drainage at the incision site may indicate an infection, treatable with antibiotics.
- **Nerve Injury:** Rarely, nearby nerves (e.g., radial nerve or a sensory nerve along the outside part of the forearm) may be irritated, causing temporary numbness, tingling, or weakness in the hand or forearm.
- **Re-rupture:** The tendon may tear again if stressed too soon, emphasizing the need for careful recovery.
- **Stiffness:** Some loss of elbow motion (especially full straightening) may occur, though therapy usually minimizes or corrects this.
- **Heterotopic Ossification:** Rarely, extra bone may form near the repair site, potentially limiting motion.

Contact your doctor if you experience severe pain, fever, or signs of infection after surgery.

Expected Outcomes

Distal biceps tendon repair has a high success rate, especially when done soon after injury:

- **Pain Relief:** Pain from the rupture decreases significantly within weeks, with full relief as healing progresses.
- **Restored Strength:** Most patients regain 80-95% of their biceps strength, allowing lifting, pulling, and twisting motions (e.g., turning a screwdriver) by 4-6 months.
- **Improved Function:** You'll return to daily tasks, work, and sports with a stable, functional elbow. Full elbow extension may be slightly limited (5-10 degrees) but rarely affects use.
- **Long-Term Results:** The significant majority of patients achieve lasting success, with the repair holding strong for years.

Success depends on surgical timing, the extent of tendon damage, and your commitment to therapy.

Final Notes

Distal biceps tendon repair can restore your arm's power and get you back to your active life. If you have questions about the surgery or recovery, feel free to discuss them with your surgeon. We're here to support you every step of the way!