

Tennis Elbow Surgery: What You Need to Know

Tennis elbow, or lateral epicondylitis, is a condition where the tendons attaching to the outer elbow become irritated and degenerated, often from chronic, repetitive elbow or wrist motions. This causes pain and weakness, especially with gripping or lifting with the arm away from the body. When rest, physical therapy, or injections don't provide lasting relief, surgery may be recommended. We offer two techniques—**open surgery** and **arthroscopic surgery**—to repair the damaged tendon and relieve symptoms. Below, we explain the surgery, recovery, potential complications, and expected outcomes to help you feel prepared.

Description of the Surgery

Tennis elbow surgery removes or repairs the damaged tendon tissue at the lateral epicondyle (the bony bump on the outer elbow). Both techniques aim to relieve pain and restore function, and your surgeon will recommend the best option for you:

- **Open Technique:**

The surgeon makes a small incision (about 1-2 inches) over the outer elbow. The damaged portion of the tendon (usually the extensor carpi radialis brevis, or ECRB) is identified, and the unhealthy tissue is removed. In some cases, the tendon is repaired or reattached to the bone with sutures or anchors. The incision is closed with stitches, and a bandage is applied.

- **Arthroscopic Technique:**

This minimally invasive approach uses a tiny camera (arthroscope) and specialized tools. The surgeon makes two or more small incisions (less than ½ inch) near the elbow. The arthroscope guides the surgeon to remove the damaged tendon tissue and inflammatory tissue from the within the joint using a shaver and heat probe. The incisions are closed with stitches and a bandage is applied. This technique may result in smaller scars and a slightly faster early recovery.

Both procedures are typically performed under local or regional anesthesia (numbing the elbow or arm), as well as sedation or general anesthesia. Surgery takes 30 minutes and is outpatient, meaning you can go home the same day.

What to Expect During Recovery

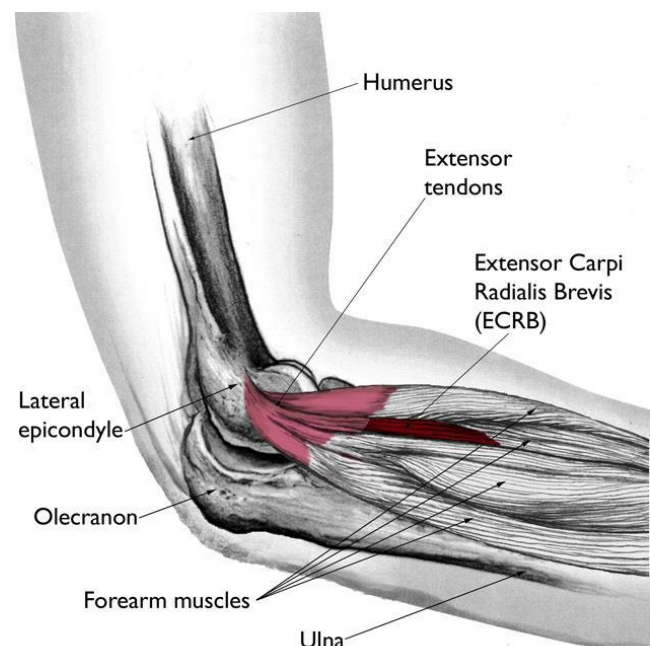
Recovery varies slightly between techniques, but both require time for the tendon to heal. Here's a general timeline:

- **Immediately After Surgery:**

Your elbow will be bandaged, and you may wear a sling to rest the arm. Mild pain, swelling, or stiffness is normal, manageable with prescribed pain medication or over-the-counter options like ibuprofen. Keep your arm elevated to reduce swelling. Make sure to work on gentle motion exercises of the fingers, hand, and shoulder to avoid stiffness.

- **First 1-2 Weeks:**

Stitches are removed within 7-14 days. You'll avoid lifting or gripping with the affected arm. Gentle motion exercises of the elbow, shoulder, wrist, and hand are allowed.



Source: aaos.org

- **Weeks 3-6:**

Physical therapy often begins to restore elbow motion and strength. Avoid strenuous use of the arm, like sports or heavy lifting, during this time.

- **Months 2-3:**

Most patients return to normal daily activities, with improving strength. Therapy continues to rebuild tendon resilience while the tissues heal. Many patients begin to feel resolution of their pain around this time point, while others may take longer.

- **Full Recovery:**

Complete healing, including return to sports or heavy work, takes 3-6 months. Arthroscopic patients may recover a bit faster early on, but long-term outcomes are equivalent for both techniques.

Follow your surgeon's guidance on therapy and activity restrictions for the best results.

Potential Complications

Tennis elbow surgery is low-risk, but complications can occur. These are rare and usually treatable:

- **Infection:** Redness, swelling, or drainage at the incision site may indicate an infection, treatable with antibiotics.
- **Nerve or Blood Vessel Injury:** Rarely, nearby structures may be irritated, causing temporary numbness, tingling, or weakness. Permanent injury is extremely rare.
- **Stiffness:** Some patients experience lingering elbow stiffness, often improved with therapy.
- **Persistent Pain:** In rare cases, pain may not fully resolve, particularly if another issue (like arthritis) is present.

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

Expected Outcomes

Tennis elbow surgery has a high success rate, with most patients regaining comfort and function:

- **Pain Relief:** Significant pain reduction is typically noticeable within weeks, with full relief by 3-6 months.
- **Improved Function:** Most patients resume gripping, lifting, and sports without discomfort. Strength returns gradually with therapy.
- **Long-Term Results:** Approximately 80-90% of patients experience lasting improvement. Outcomes are similar for open and arthroscopic techniques.

Success depends on the extent of tendon damage, your adherence to therapy, and avoiding overuse during healing.

Final Notes

Tennis elbow surgery can free you from pain and restore your arm's function. Whether we use an open or arthroscopic approach, we'll tailor the procedure to your needs. If you have questions about the surgery or recovery, feel free to discuss them with your surgeon. We're here to help you every step of the way!