

My Elbow Hurts When I Lift Things

Understanding Load-Related Elbow Pain

Why Does Lifting Hurt My Elbow?

The elbow is the hinge that transfers force between the shoulder and the hand. Every time you lift something — whether a grocery bag, a box, or a weight — all that force flows through the elbow, stressing the tendons, ligaments, and joint surfaces. When any of those structures are irritated, inflamed, or degenerated, lifting becomes painful in very predictable ways. The pattern of pain — where exactly it hurts and with what movements — points to the specific structure involved.

What Is Most Likely Causing This?

Pain on the outer elbow with lifting (palm down):

- Tennis elbow (lateral epicondylalgia) — most common cause of elbow pain with lifting
- Worsened by gripping, turning, and extending the wrist under load

Pain on the inner elbow with lifting (palm up):

- Golfer's elbow (medial epicondylalgia) — inner elbow tendon degeneration
- Common in people who do heavy or repetitive gripping work

Pain at the front of the elbow with lifting / biceps curl:

- Biceps tendinopathy — irritation of the distal biceps tendon where it attaches at the elbow
- Worse with palm-up lifting and carrying heavy loads

General elbow aching with all lifting:

- Elbow arthritis — diffuse joint pain with most loaded activities
- Joint swelling and stiffness often accompany

What Does It Feel Like?

- A sharp or aching pain localized to one side of the elbow when picking up or carrying objects
- Weakness — surprising inability to carry what used to be easy

- Pain that lingers for hours after lifting
- Having to switch to the other hand or avoid lifting altogether

When Should I Be Concerned?

- Sudden severe pain and a pop with a heavy lift — possible tendon rupture
- Visible deformity or a bulge in the arm muscle
- Numbness or tingling in the hand accompanying elbow pain

The Good News

Load-related elbow pain is among the most treatable conditions in physical therapy. By identifying the precise structure involved and applying the right combination of tendon loading, activity modification, and technique correction, the vast majority of patients return to lifting what they need to — at work, at the gym, and at home — without pain.

With targeted PT, most patients successfully **return to full lifting** capacity within 6 to 12 weeks.

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