

Biceps Tendon Tear & Repair at the Elbow

What You Need to Know

What Is a Distal Biceps Tendon Tear?

The biceps muscle attaches to the forearm at the elbow via the distal biceps tendon — a strong cord that connects to the radius bone. A distal biceps tendon tear occurs when this tendon partially or completely ruptures, most often from a sudden eccentric load (catching something heavy, or a weight that unexpectedly jerks the elbow straight). It is most common in men aged 40–60 and is often associated with a loud pop at the time of injury.

Unlike proximal biceps tears at the shoulder (which rarely require surgery), distal biceps tears at the elbow significantly impair elbow flexion strength and — especially — forearm rotation (supination) strength. Surgical repair is strongly recommended for active individuals, ideally within 2–3 weeks of injury while the tendon can still be retrieved and reattached.

What Does It Feel Like?

- A sudden pop in the front of the elbow at the time of injury
- Immediate sharp pain followed by aching and bruising
- Significant bruising spreading down the forearm over 24–48 hours
- Weakness — especially when turning the palm up (supination) — this is the hallmark loss
- A visible gap or bulge in the upper arm where the muscle has retracted ("Popeye" sign)
- In partial tears: pain with loaded forearm activities without a complete rupture

What Can I Expect After Surgery?

Weeks 1–4: Protection

- Arm in a brace or splint at 90° of elbow flexion
- Gentle passive range-of-motion exercises — no active loading of the repair

Weeks 4–8: Restoring motion

- Progressive active range of motion — flexion, extension, and forearm rotation
- No resistance loading yet

Weeks 8–16: Strengthening

- Progressive resistance — starting light and building systematically
- Forearm supination strengthening is a key focus

Months 4–6: Return to full activity

- Heavy lifting and manual work gradually reintroduced
- Most patients regain near-full strength by 6 months

When Should I Be Concerned?

- Signs of infection after surgery
- Significant numbness or weakness in the hand
- Failure to regain forearm rotation despite consistent PT

The Good News

With prompt surgical repair and dedicated physical therapy, the outcomes after distal biceps tendon repair are excellent. Most patients regain near-full strength and return to manual work, weightlifting, and sport. The key is not delaying surgery and committing fully to the rehabilitation program.

With surgical repair and focused PT, most patients regain **near-full strength by 6 months** following injury.

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