

Cochrane Corner

Oral and topical NSAIDs for tennis elbow

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Lateral elbow pain is common (population prevalence 1–3%) and causes considerable morbidity. Its peak incidence is 40–50 years and symptoms often persist for 18 months to two years. A small proportion go on to have surgery for persisting symptoms. 'Lateral elbow pain' is described by

many analogous terms in the literature, including 'tennis elbow', 'lateral epicondylitis', 'rowing elbow', 'tendonitis of the common extensor origin', and 'peritendonitis of the elbow'. Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) have long been the first line of treatment for all sites of tendinitis,

including that of the lateral elbow. Several types of both oral and topical NSAID are available either directly over the counter or on prescription. GPs in New Zealand are cautious about oral NSAIDs (because of adverse effects) and hesitant to use topical NSAID due to the lack of subsidy.

	Short term success	Harms	Evidence	Advantages
Green et al¹ Topical NSAID vs placebo	Improved pain at 4 weeks NNTB = 5 to 8	The sum of harms NNTH = 42	Cochrane review ¹	Effective Fewer side effects than higher dose
Green et al¹ Oral NSAID vs placebo	Reduction in pain which was significant but no effect for responding	NNTH = 5 for abdominal pain	Cochrane review ¹	Probably effective but harms are relatively high
Green et al¹ Oral NSAID vs cortisone injection	Response to treatment cortisone better than NSAID for patients NNTB = 4	Harms not reported	Cochrane review ¹	Clinician assessment found no benefit

NNTB = numbers needed to treat for one remission

NNTH = numbers needed to harm

Reference

1. Green S, Buchbinder R, Barnsley L, Hall S, White M, Smidt N, Assendelft W. Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) for treating lateral elbow pain in adults. The Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews 2001, Issue 4.

Members of the Royal New Zealand College of General Practitioners can have access to the full reviews by contacting Cherylyn Pearson at the College in Wellington. For the access codes to the Cochrane library contact cpearson@rnzcgcp.org.nz at the College.