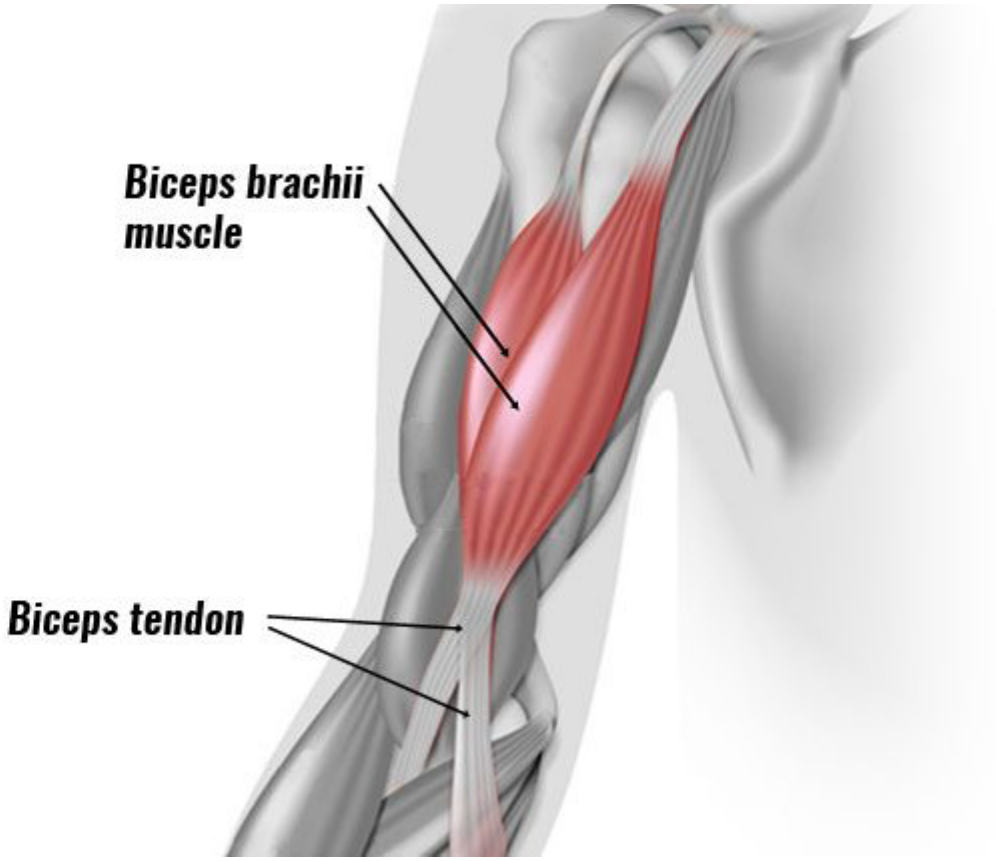
Distal (lower) biceps tendonitis

Distal biceps tendonitis typically affects people who do weight training in the gym, but it can also affect those doing certain other sports.

Where is my distal biceps tendon and what is the function of the biceps?



Your bicep is the muscle on the front of your upper arm. It has three tendons, two at the top Inserting in the shoulder, and one at the bottom, your distal biceps tendon, connecting your bicep muscle to your lower arm (forearm).

The biceps muscle has two functions: It flexes the arm, i.e. it bends your forearm upwards, towards your shoulder, e.g. when you do a bicep curl. It also supinates

your hand, which means it turns it outwards, e.g. when you turn a key in a lock clockwise with your right hand or anticlockwise with the left.

What is a Tendonitis?

A tendonitis develops when you overwork or overload the tendon. So, any exercise or activity that involves flexion of the forearm or supination of the hand that you overdo can cause an injury of the distal biceps tendon.

It can be an acute (sudden) overload, for example when you do a gym session that is a lot harder than what you would usually do, and just hours later it starts aching. Or it can be a chronic, cumulative overload, where you've completed a lot of hard training over several weeks, and the tendon has not had enough time between sessions to repair the micro-damage from the training, so instead the damage accumulates over time.

Distal biceps tendon rupture or a tendonitis?

A tendonitis often becomes progressively more painful during a training session or during a match/race. But sometimes, the pain only starts hours later, or the next morning.

However, if you experienced a sudden, sharp pain during a training session or game, there's good reason to suspect that you may have a distal biceps tendon tear rather than a tendonitis.

If this is the case, you need to see a doctor who can do an ultrasound scan or an MRI scan to see the extent of the damage.

You can do some self-tests but these can be additionally painful. Another, less painful indication of a distal biceps tendon rupture is called the Popeye sign, where your muscle is bunched up on your upper arm even though you're not tensing it. This could mean that you've ruptured either the distal biceps tendon or one or both of the top ones and now the muscle has contracted.

Distal biceps tendonitis treatment

Relative rest as part of distal biceps tendonitis treatment

This doesn't mean that you have to take a total break from being active. Careful strength training is the best way to get your tendon back to its full capacity, but first you have to decrease the load on it – the amount of work that you're asking it to do. How much you have to rest it and what you can do will depend on your case and how bad it is.

Most of the time, if the tendon is acutely flared up, avoid or go light on exercises that involve flexing the elbow or supinating it. So, if we think of gym exercises, things like pull-ups and biceps curls that should be reduced. Exercises where you push stuff away from you are usually okay.

The golden rule here is: If it causes you any pain during this first period of recovery, just don't do it, or reduce your weight to a level where it doesn't hurt. This might mean dropping from your usual bicep curls with 25kg dumbbells down to using just 5kg. Don't let pride negatively affect your rehabilitation!

Key then is to identify what activities the tendon can still do that don't cause it to flare it up. Aware of the limitations, you have to use that and slowly build up from there until you get back to the weights that you used to be able to do.

If your activity isn't weights, the load adjustment identification process becomes more difficult. Some people can get distal biceps tendonitis through playing tennis. In this case, you have to identify where the weakness in the kinetic chain is. What is it about your technique that puts too much strain on that tendon? How can you change your technique to prevent this from happening again and to give your injured tendon some respite while you recover?

Strength exercises for distal biceps tendonitis treatment

Strength exercises are key to getting the tendon back to at least its original strength, if not stronger than before. As explained above, there are two motions that need to e worked to strengthen the tendon. There's flexing the elbow so that the forearm moves towards the shoulder and there's also turning the hand outwards.

Start with easy levels

Experience tells us that with biceps tendonitis, and particularly the distal tendon, you have to start at a really easy level. Start much lighter than what you think you should even if it feels ridiculously easy. Don't let pride or vanity negatively affect your recovery.

Monitor the 24-hour response

Tendons are fickle things and often won't tell you that they are hurting while you're doing the activity; it will only be hours later or even the next day. So, monitoring it over the 24 hours after a strength training session; if it is fine, you can go a little bit heavier the next time.

If you find that it's there-or-thereabouts, that it's not quite happy with it but it's sort of okay and it calms down within that same day, we recommend that you stick

with that session until it's comfortable, and only then should you increase the weight.

Recovery time

Make sure you give your tendon enough recovery time between sessions. Some of our patients do well with exercising the tendon twice a week, so that there's a nice, big recovery gap between sessions. Others can handle three times a week. Every person is unique and so no one size fits all.

Daily activities

Be aware of how your daily, non-sporting activities can influence the healing process. Everyday things like carrying shopping bags or lifting your child up can irritate that tendon.
If you have a job where there's a lot of lifting involved, you're going to have to make a plan to give your tendon a bit of a rest, so have a talk with your manager.

If you can skip one week of house cleaning or get someone else to carry things for you for a couple of weeks, go for it, so that you can better concentrate on your rehab for your distal biceps tendon to strengthen it back up. As it gets stronger, you can integrate those daily activities into your life again.

How we can help

Need more help with your injury? You're welcome to book a consultation with us online via video call, or arrange to come into the clinic for an assessment of your injury and a tailored treatment plan.