

Achilles Tendonitis

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During a typical one mile jog, a runner's heel will strike the ground 1,500 times. The force of impact is absorbed largely by the muscles and tendons in the back of the leg. Achilles tendonitis is the result of this repetitive stress causing inflammation to the Achilles tendon.

Several factors have been identified in the cause of this injury. Inflexible or tight calf muscles create more tension in the tendon during training. Running up hill, a sudden increase in mileage, running on uneven ground or improper foot mechanics all can singly or collectively produce tendon injury. Even cyclists, who use the ankle to push down while pedaling, may develop tendonitis.

The pain of Achilles tendonitis is felt about 1 1/2 to 2 inches above the heel, being made worse by walking on the toes. The pain is worse with increased activity and should lessen with rest. There is rarely any swelling present, as opposed to calcaneal (heel) bursitis which will produce pain in the same area.

Early treatment of this injury should include rest and, of course, cold to the area. Gentle stretching of the calf muscles should begin as pain allows. Stretching must be performed in a bent-knee and straight-leg position to be effective in increasing proper flexibility in the calf. Steroid injections are to be completely avoided. Cross-training such as swimming or walking should continue as the Achilles heals. The use of heel lifts may produce less stress to the tendon and orthotics may be indicated, improving foot support and running biomechanics. Stretching should continue as the athlete returns to his workout and a program of calf muscle strengthening should be incorporated to reduce stress upon the tendon.

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