

Achilles Tendonitis

Tendons are tough, fibrous cords of tissue that connect muscle to bone. The Achilles tendon, which connects the calf muscle to the heel bone, is the largest tendon in the human body. While this tendon can withstand forces of 1,000 pounds or more, it is the most frequently ruptured tendon. Achilles Tendonitis, an inflammation of the tendon or tendon sheath, is a common overuse injury that can happen to anyone.



What Causes Achilles Tendonitis?

Any number of events may trigger an attack of Achilles Tendonitis, including:

1. Rapidly increasing your activity, running mileage or speed
2. Adding hill running or stair climbing to your training routine
3. Starting up too quickly after a layoff
4. Trauma caused by sudden and/or hard contraction of the calf muscles when putting out extra effort, such as in a final sprint
5. Overuse resulting from the natural lack of flexibility in the calf muscles

What are the Symptoms of Achilles Tendonitis?

Symptoms of Achilles tendonitis fall into a common pattern:

1. Mild pain after exercise or running that gradually worsens
2. Episodes of diffused or localized pain along the tendon, sometimes severe, during or after activity
3. Morning tenderness above the point where the tendon attaches to the heel
4. Stiffness that generally diminishes as the tendon warms up with use
5. Swelling and/or redness

What is the Treatment for Achilles Tendonitis?

Treatment depends on the degree of injury to the tendon, but usually involves:

1. **Rest**, which may mean a total withdrawal from running or exercise
2. **Immobilization** such as a cast or brace
3. **Switching to another exercise**, such as swimming, that does not stress the Achilles tendon
4. **Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory medication**
5. A **heel or shoe insert** to support the muscle & relieve stress on the tendon
6. **Physical therapy** for stretching, massage, ultrasound and appropriate exercises

Surgery is often an option of last resort. If friction between the tendon and its covering sheath or nearby heel bone cause irritation, surgery to remove the fibrous tissue, offending bone and repair any tendon tears may be the best treatment option. Recovery is slow, may require a temporary cast and includes a rehabilitation program to avoid weakness.

How can Achilles Tendonitis be Prevented?

Six steps to reduce your risk of incurring an attack:

1. **Choose your running (or any) shoes carefully.** They should provide sufficient cushion for the heel strike. Using a prescribed orthotic to change the position of a poorly aligned heel bone may also help. Perhaps the best precaution is to know your limits and to follow a sensible program when you exercise.
2. **Walk and stretch to warm up gradually** before activity. It is better to spend a few minutes warming up than to spend months on the sidelines with a ruptured Achilles tendon.
3. Focus on **stretching and strengthening** the muscles in the calf.
4. **Increase your running distance and your speed gradually**, in increments no greater than 10% a week.
5. **Avoid unaccustomed strenuous activity** like sprinting, hill running, etc.
6. **Cool down** properly after exercise.