

Tendonitis is no small matter especially when it comes to the Achilles tendon. What may start as tendonitis may just put you on the bench.

By Dr. Molly S. Judge

This is a series on the prevention of painful conditions of the foot and ankle. And for those who already have pain, some helpful tips on reducing discomfort that will help improve quality of life.

A patient came to my office shortly after an injury from a Saturday football scrimmage. A weekend warrior, this 40-year-old man's athletic activity consists of playing football with friends only on rare weekends and he never warms up for such events. Other than that, he is an armchair quarterback who admits that he has had Achilles tendonitis on and off over the years. He came into the office using crutches a neighbor had lent him.

When asked how this injury occurred, he said he really didn't understand it himself. He was running and looking back over his shoulder trying to complete a reception. Out of no where, he said he heard a shot and felt a sharp, stabbing pain in his leg and ankle. He said, "It was like someone hit me in the leg with a bat, or shot me or something." He really expected to turn around and see someone behind him but no one was even close.

This description of a sharp, sudden pain behind the ankle and lower leg is classic for an Achilles tendon rupture. He couldn't stand on his foot without searing pain in the ankle and he had lost his ability to stand up on his toes. Doing a simple toe rise is a quick and easy test of the strength and function of the muscles and joints of the ankle and foot. He failed miserably and it was due to the rupture of the Achilles tendon.

When he was lying on his belly, I could see a small cup-shaped defect, a dell behind his ankle where the tendon ends had split apart. This condition is one of the most devastating injuries that can occur in the leg and foot. Without proper treatment, disability is certain. When this injury happens it is vital to first stabilize the ankle and eliminate swelling of the calf to prevent other complications such as blood clots. In many cases, special pictures of the tendon, an MRI (Magnetic Resonance Imaging), will show the extent of tendon injury and the size of the gap between tendon ends. This helps the physician to decide whether to simply put the leg in cast or perform surgery. For conservative treatment a short leg, hard cast is applied for approximately eight weeks. This is followed by a very long course of rehabilitation for regaining strength and function of the Achilles tendon. In some cases, surgery is the most beneficial way to repair the tendon and allow for it to heal, returning to a normal length. If you have suffered from this injury, it is important to be evaluated by a foot and ankle specialist to get an expert opinion on what treatment is best.

An Achilles tendon tear or rupture is often the result of Achilles tendonitis that has gone without treatment. Over time, the inflammation of this condition gets worse causing changes within the tendon that weaken it and later result in partial tears.

Achilles tendonitis, inflammation of the strongest tendon of the leg, ankle and foot, can sneak up on you very slowly over time. Often patients fail to identify any injury or accident that may have caused it to develop. This condition results in pain and a loss of motion at the ankle. If you have pain behind your ankle and cannot bend the ankle beyond 90 degrees to the leg it is likely that you have a tight Achilles tendon. To check for this, a patient lies flat on his back with the knee bent. The foot is positioned with the second toe aligning with the center of the knee. Pushing up on the foot the ankle will flex causing tension along the Achilles tendon. If the Achilles tendon is too tight, the ankle will not flex past a 90 degree angle with the leg. Often this tightness is painful and simple squeezing of the calf muscle can cause a lot of pain. Over time, if untreated, Achilles inflammation, or swelling, actually causes a wearing of the tendon covering and later begins to weaken the tendon fibers much like a shoe string wears thin and before it breaks. This causes weakness, pain and difficulty walking. Left untreated this condition slowly worsens over time until one day the tendon may just snap.

You can avoid Achilles tendonitis by warming up your calf muscles by stretching before and after heavy weight bearing or athletic activity. An aggressive stretching program is the best defense against injury and muscle strain. For those who already suffer from Achilles tendonitis, using over-the-counter anti inflammatory agents the day before and a couple days after athletics can be of good benefit. Ankle wraps can help prevent swelling and support the tendon especially useful when on uneven surfaces such as grass or sand.

People who suffer from Achilles tendonitis often have other deformities within the leg, foot and ankle such as flat foot, an abnormal position of the heel (which causes tension in the Achilles tendon), ankle joint arthritis, and heel spurs. In many patients, correcting these conditions with the benefit of supportive athletic shoes or prescription orthotic devices (shoe inserts) will reduce pressure and irritation within the Achilles tendon. For specifics on stretching programs and other therapy, talk to your foot and ankle specialist. One visit to a specialist can be the ounce of prevention that saves you a pound of cure.

A podiatrist is a physician who has completed four years of medical school and multiple years of residency training focused on the health of the leg, foot and ankle. Your foot and ankle specialist has the background of studies and training to help you finally get the answers you need to eliminate your foot and ankle pain once and for all. To find a foot and ankle specialist near you check the web at www.footphysicians.com or search the official national reference for foot and ankle surgeons; the American College of Foot and Ankle Surgeons at acfas.org

Get on your feet at the Jamie Farr

Where are you in your return to summertime fitness? If you haven't been out yet, try a round of golf to limber up your body and your mind. Getting out in the fresh air for a long walk along the golf course can be just what the doctor ordered for an early return to physical fitness. Toledo is home to the Jamie Farr-Owens Corning Classic presented by Kroger, a favorite among golfing events in the LPGA tour. This year the event is June 28 – July 4, 2010 so we have only a short time to get in shape. Two days, Saturday & Sunday the of the Jamie Farr will be broadcast on ESPNII so we may just catch you on TV looking your best at Highland Meadows Country Club. If you haven't been there, Highland Meadows Golf Course provides one of Toledo's finest landscapes with winding fairways and well-manicured greens. The fairway greens are so plush that a shot landing there looks as if it is teed up. Your fairway shots are usually long and straight given this "tee up" texture of the grass. Strolling along the fairways is the most pleasant work out your legs and feet will ever experience. A fabulous spectators' sport, walking this course provides the perfect environment for getting a healthy dose of fresh air while getting autographs from your favorite female pro golfers. Who knew that simply going to the Jamie Farr this year could be so good for your health?

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