

Achilles tendon pain (chronic)

Information and advice

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This information is designed to supplement the advice given by your doctor, and should be used for longstanding achilles problems only. The information is written by physiotherapists and is based on the latest medical advice.

The achilles tendon

The achilles tendon is the large tendon at the back of the ankle, and connects the large calf muscles to the heel bone. Just like joints, the achilles tendon is also subject to 'wear and tear' or 'degeneration' and can result in an achilles tendinopathy.



What are the symptoms of achilles tendinopathy?

People usually complain of pain and stiffness up the back of the ankle, especially in the morning. The symptoms normally start gradually, and pain typically occurs whilst running or walking, especially up hill or stairs, and subsides with rest. The tendon may feel hot and swollen, and may feel lumpy to touch.

What causes achilles tendinopathy?

Anything which places increased stress on the achilles tendon can cause symptoms. There are a number of causes, which include:

- Poor ankle/foot biomechanics – e.g prior to flat footed
- Poor conditioning – weakness and or tightness of the calf muscles
- Overuse injury – such as repetitive uphill running.

What can you do to help relieve symptoms?

Rest the tendon – reduce the amount of running or walking you do.

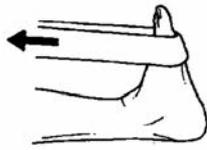
Shoe wear – A small heel will reduce the stretch on the tendon. In flat shoes a heel lift can be worn in both shoes. Make sure the back of your shoe does not rub on the painful area.

Apply ice to the area for 10-15 minutes to help reduce any inflammation and soreness. A bag of frozen peas wrapped in a damp towel is ideal. Please do not do this if your skin sensation is impaired. Never apply ice directly to the skin as it can cause burns.

Medications can be taken to help ease the pain and inflammation - speak to your GP or pharmacist.

Stretching the tendon can help reduce pain especially when performed before standing after rest.

Exercises:



Before getting up out of bed or from a chair, stretch the foot upwards, using a towel to help.

Hold for 20 seconds, five times
Repeat three to four times a day



Place the affected foot behind and gently bend your knees – feel the stretch in the back of the calf.

Hold for 20 seconds, five times
Repeat three to four times a day



Place the affected foot behind. Keeping the back leg straight, bend the front knee gently lunging forwards – feel the stretch in the back of the calf.

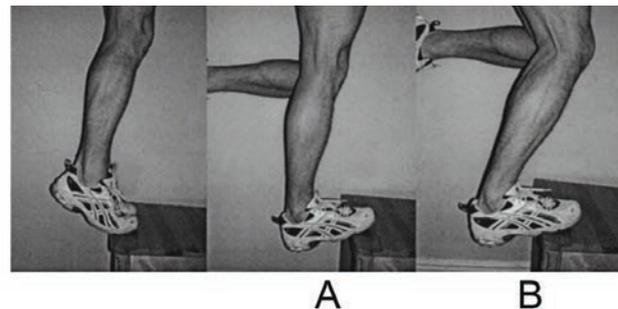
Hold for 20 seconds, five times
Repeat three to four times a day

Eccentric strengthening

The following exercise regime is an effective treatment if performed twice a day for 12 weeks.

Exercise 1 - with knees straight (A)

- Stand with your heels over the edge of a step
- Hold on for balance (door frame or wall)
- Rise up onto the toes of your unaffected leg only
- Transfer your weight onto the toes of the affected leg only
- Slowly lower the heel of the affected leg below the level of the step (A)
- Transfer your weight and repeat this 15 times (one set)
- Perform three sets with a small rest in between
- Take care not to lose your balance



Exercise 2 - with knees bent (B)

- As above but performing with the knees kept slightly bent (B)

You may find the exercises painful especially for the first few weeks but this is to be expected. Stop if the pain becomes severe. If you are struggling with these exercises, please ask for help from a qualified physiotherapist. Once these exercises become pain free, perform the exercises with weights or a loaded rucksack.

Summary

Achilles tendinopathy pain can take some months to settle down. If your symptoms do not settle within three months of following the above steps, you may benefit from a review with a physiotherapist or podiatrist.

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