

Achilles Tendonitis / Tendonopathy

What is Achilles tendonitis?

The Achilles tendon is the large tendon in the back of the ankle (See Figure 1). It connects the large calf muscles (gastrocnemius and soleus) to the heel bone. This tendon can become inflamed through overuse as well as biomechanical factors (such as an abnormal running style). The Achilles tendon has a poor blood supply, which is why it is slow to heal.

Achilles tendonitis can be either an acute or chronic condition.

Acute Achilles Tendonitis can occur as a result of training or playing too much (through over use), or too soon especially on hard surfaces.

If the player's feet roll inwards when they are running or the player 'over-pronates' then this can increase the strain on the Achilles tendon because the tendon is "twisted" as the foot rolls in on each step when the player is running (See Figure 2).



Figure 1: The Achilles tendon and the calf muscles.

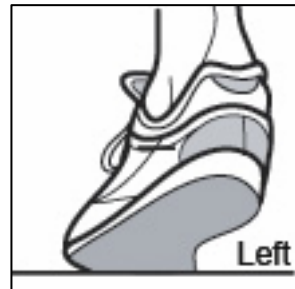


Figure 2: "Over-pronation".

If a player ignores the symptoms of Achilles tendonitis (i.e. pain) or they do not give themselves enough time to rest and allow the injury to recover or heal then the injury can become chronic (it is then called a tendonopathy).

Chronic Achilles problems (tendonopathys) are a difficult condition to treat and can take several months to settle. The pains experienced during the initial phase of the injury tend to disappear after a player has warmed up but return when training has stopped or the next morning. Eventually, the injury may get worse until it is impossible to run and train.

The symptoms of Acute Achilles Tendonitis are:

- Pain and swelling on the tendon during playing or training.
- Swelling over the Achilles tendon.
- Sometimes the player can feel a ‘creaking’ or feel a painful lump when they touch the Achilles tendon.

Symptoms for Chronic Achilles problems (tendonopathys) are:

- Pain and stiffness in the Achilles tendon especially in the morning.
- Pain in the tendon when walking, playing or training.
- All the aforementioned symptoms of acute tendonitis.

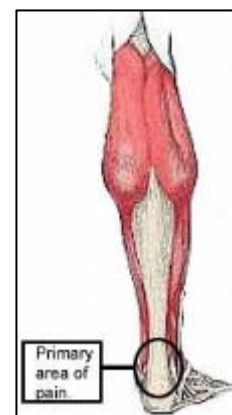


Figure 3: The site of Achilles tendon pain.

What can the player do?

If a player experiences any of the symptoms of acute Achilles Tendonitis, firstly they should rest (stop training) and apply ice. The player could wear a heel pad to raise the heel and take some strain off the Achilles tendon (See Figure 4). A player should see a sports injury professional who will be able to advise you on the best treatment and rehabilitation options – sooner rather than later.

What can a sports injury professional do?

A sports injury professional (physiotherapist or sports doctor) has a number of options available to them. A sports doctor will be able to make a diagnosis and may prescribe anti-inflammatory medication if appropriate. Sports massage techniques can be used and orthotics (if suitable) may be prescribed. Strapping tape may be used to support the back of the leg or tendon (See Figure 5). A physiotherapist or sports doctor will instruct you on a strengthening program to increase the strength of the Achilles tendon (See Figure 6). This strengthening program involves a particular type of strengthening known as eccentric strengthening. Stretching and other exercises can also be helpful. If appropriate a biomechanical analysis can be performed to correct any deficiencies. Advice and education on training schedules can also be beneficial.



Figure 4: Heel raises.



Figure 5: Achilles tendon strapping.



Figure 6: Eccentric Calf Strengthening