
Achilles Tendinopathy

Introduction

The purpose of this leaflet is to provide you with some general advice about Achilles Tendinopathy, how to manage your pain and some simple exercises. You may be sent this leaflet while waiting for your physiotherapy appointment.

What is Achilles Tendinopathy?

Achilles tendinopathy (tendinosis) is a common condition that affects the tendon that connects your calf muscles to the heel bone (calcaneus). The Achilles tendon is the strongest in the body, allowing you to push up the weight of your body onto your tiptoes. It therefore takes a lot of stress as you walk. Sometimes due to increased or abnormal stress to the tendon (i.e. a sudden increase of activity such as running, jumping or standing for longer periods) the tendon can become painful and swelling and stiffness can occur. Certain activities (such as running, jumping) will need to be modified to allow the tendon to settle down and heal. For most people the symptoms of Achilles tendinopathy usually clear within 3-6 months of starting treatment.



What are the symptoms Achilles Tendinopathy?

Achilles tendinopathy pain is usually felt above the heel and into the lower portion of your calf. It tends to feel very stiff in the morning which improves after a few minutes walking. The tendon itself can sometimes become swollen and tender to touch. The level of pain itself can vary from soreness after exercising to severe pain that limits exercise entirely.

How is this condition diagnosed?

Achilles tendinopathy is usually diagnosed by a doctor or physiotherapist on physical examination. Scans/x-rays are not usually needed unless there is a suggestion of a complete rupture of tendon. In this case, an ultrasound scan can be used. On rare occasions Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) may be used.

What causes Achilles Tendinopathy?

The cause of Achilles tendinopathy is not yet completely understood but we know that tendinopathy occurs when a tendon is unable to adapt to the strain placed upon it. As such there are certain factors that are thought to increase your risk:

- Age: The condition is more commonly found after the age of 30.
- Gender: It is more common in men.
- Weight: Being overweight leaves you more at risk of an Achilles tendinopathy.

- Long periods on your feet i.e. walking or running results in prolonged loading of the tendon.
- Tightness and/or weakness in the calf muscles affects ankle flexibility and the ability to tolerate prolonged activity.
- Diabetes: People with Diabetes can be at an increased risk of developing Achilles tendinopathy.
- The knee not being aligned over the foot during movement due to weak leg and pelvic muscles resulting in increased stresses on the Achilles tendon.
- Stiff joints in the foot.
- Footwear with poor cushioning/support.
- Exercise where you have poor balance and control of your lower limb movement can also increase your risk of developing Achilles tendinopathy.

Common exercise related causes:

- Running further than you are used to.
- Running at a higher intensity than you are used to.
- Old or poor quality footwear.

How can I treat my Achilles tendinopathy?

Thankfully, Achilles tendinopathy can usually be treated through activity modification and exercise.

Relative rest/modification of activity:

- Although keeping active is important certain activities such as running and jumping are likely to aggravate symptoms. It is therefore advised that you reduce these activities to a level that doesn't cause symptoms or change your activity (e.g. to swimming or cycling.)

Ice therapy

- Ice can help in reducing pain and possible swelling around the tendon – wrapping an ice pack in a towel and placing against the Achilles (for no more than 15-20 minutes) at regular intervals throughout the day (i.e. four times a day if possible) and after exercise.

Footwear

- Shoes should be supportive but not compressive around the foot, with well cushioned soles. – avoid high heels, loose fitting shoes or sandals. your doctor or physiotherapist may refer you to podiatry for shoe inserts.

Physiotherapy and exercise

A physiotherapist can provide you with exercises to improve strength and flexibility in your ankle.

Evidence shows that muscle lengthening / muscle shortening can gradually improve the tendons ability to cope with load. The exercises are done in a controlled way and should help to gradually reduce pain and swelling.

This programme can take between up to six months to significantly improve your symptoms but this is a guide as symptoms can improve a lot quicker than that. Unfortunately there are no 'quick fixes' for this condition.

Morning stiffness is usually the first symptom to improve however pain and discomfort on touching/squeezing the tendon is the last symptom to go.

Note that during the concentric (muscle shortening) / eccentric (muscle lengthening) exercise programme you may experience an increase in pain. As long as this pain is at a low level (3-4 out of 10 on your pain scale) as long as the pain settles within 20-30 mins. This is acceptable. Your pain will reduce as you continue with your rehabilitation.

In the initial stages try and keep your ankle moving by:

[Video](#)



Comfortably pointing your foot away from you and back up again towards your face till you feel a stretch in the back of the calf. Hold for 20 seconds or as able. Repeat this exercise 5-10 times 2-3 times a day or as able.

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[Video](#)



Turn your ankle fully inwards and outwards or as able till you feel a stretch on either side of the ankle. Hold the stretch for 5-10 seconds. Repeat this exercise 5-10 times, 2-3 times a day or as able.

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[Video](#)



Sitting or lying on the floor or sofa with your knee straight and your foot either flat against a wall or sofa. Push the ball of the foot against the wall or sofa. Hold the contraction for 5-10secs or as able x 5-10 times, 2-3 times a day.

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If this regime is too much do the exercises at least once as a minimum.

The physiotherapist may also need to address any lower limb alignment problems that may be contributing to your foot pain.

You may feel some mild discomfort during these exercises but if you feel an increase in pain then seek advice from the physiotherapist before continuing.

For further information

Please email ghnt.newcastlegatesheadtims@nhs.net, ring our Booking Office on **0191 4452643** or visit our website at: www.tims.nhs.uk which provides online guidance and support on managing your musculoskeletal (MSK) condition effectively.

The NHS website also provides trusted online information and guidance on all aspects of health and healthcare to help you manage your condition and/or inform your choices about your health: www.nhs.uk.

Useful links

The Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) can offer on-the-spot advice and information about the NHS. You can contact them on freephone **0800 032 02 02** or e-mail northoftynepals@nhct.nhs.uk.



Tyneside Integrated Musculoskeletal Service

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