

# BODYSHOP

BY MARLENE CIMONS

## Stay Well-Heeled

Sidestep Achilles tendinitis with these protective strategies

The Achilles tendon is the largest tendon in the human body, and it can withstand forces of 1,000 pounds or more. But it's also the most frequently ruptured tendon, and it's prone to inflammation. Especially in runners.

Achilles tendinitis is one of the most nagging, frustrating, and frequent afflictions runners must endure. After plantar fasciitis—another heel-related problem—it's the most common injury to the foot and ankle area.

"Other injuries may make you *feel* injured, but Achilles tendinitis is so specific that you *feel* you can do just about everything else *except* run," says Michael Musca, a long-time runner from Portland, Maine. "My

recent Achilles episode was the first injury that kept me from running a step."

Your Achilles tendon connects your heel bone to the gastrocnemius and the soleus, two powerful muscles in your calf. It's named after Achilles, the famous Greek warrior who, according to mythology, was submerged by his mother into magical waters in the hopes of keeping him from bodily harm. Unfortunately, Achilles's heel never touched the water—that's where his mom was holding him—and, thus, his heel became the most vulnerable part of his body (eventually contributing to his demise). Many runners can relate to his suffering.

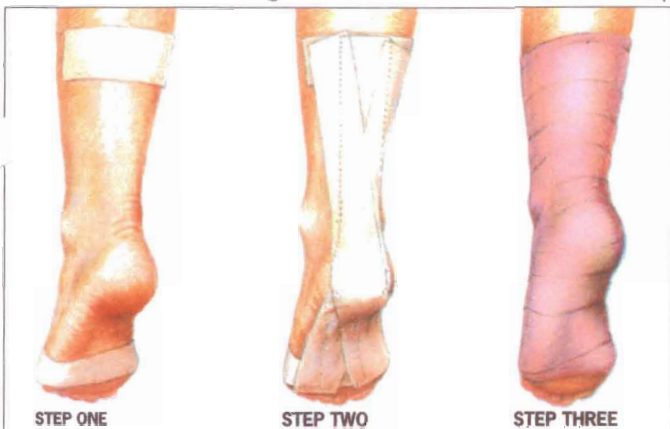
Achilles tendinitis symptoms usually include pain and swelling along the back of the heel that gradually worsen after running, and a noticeable sluggishness in the lower leg. In the morning there is typically tenderness about an inch and a half above the site where the Achilles attaches to the heel bone, and stiffness that usually lessens after the tendon warms with use. It's important to be diagnosed by a professional, because several other conditions (including partial tendon tears and heel bursitis) involve similar symptoms.

### Prevention

Although the Achilles may be a weak spot for some of us, Achilles tendinitis is preventable. Just keep the following tips in mind:

▶ **Check your shoes.** Shoes that are worn out or don't fit properly can cause Achilles tendinitis. If your shoes are worn more on one side than the other, your Achilles "will move back and forth like a windshield wiper, putting stress on the tendon," says Carol Frey, M.D., an orthopedic surgeon and director of the Foot & Ankle Center of West Coast Sports Performance in Manhattan Beach, Calif. Shoes that are worn down too much in the heel also irritate the Achilles. "You need at least 15 millimeters of heel lift to decrease the stress on your Achilles while running," Dr. Frey says.

Running shoes with too-cushy heels can also cause problems if you already have a sore Achilles tendon, adds Stephen M. Pribut, D.P.M., a Washington, D.C., sports podiatrist. In this instance, when your heel strikes the ground during running, the heel continues to



### That's a Wrap

Achilles tendinitis is not an injury you should try to run through. But once you've taken the requisite time off and the healing process has begun, here's an excellent taping technique from sports podiatrist Dr. Richard Braver. This wrap will support your Achilles as you slowly begin to run again.

• **Step one:** Using 1½-inch athletic tape (available at any drug-store), place an "anchor" strip horizontally across the back of the calf where it joins to the Achilles tendon. Place another anchor across the bottom of the forefoot.

**Step two:** While keeping your foot pointed somewhat downward, fasten a piece of tape from the calf anchor straight down the back of your leg and heel, and end it at the forefoot anchor. Apply two more pieces of tape starting on either side of the middle piece (at the calf anchor), and crisscross them at the lower end of the Achilles. Fasten both to the forefoot anchor.

**Step three:** Cover the entire wrapping with a light layer of Ace bandaging.



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sink lower into your shoe's cushioning while your body is absorbing the shock. This motion can over-stretch your Achilles tendon at the same time that your leg and body are moving forward over your foot.

‡ **Stretch sensibly.** Keeping your calves flexible with a regular stretching routine will help prevent Achilles tendinitis. But don't overdo the stretches. "The stretch that I most often recommend for the calves is the wall stretch," says Dr. Pribut. For this stretch, stand and place your hands against a wall. Keeping your right foot just a few inches from the base of the wall, slide your left foot back 2 or 3 feet. Lean forward and shift your weight onto your right leg with the knee bent. Straighten your left leg and press your left heel into the ground. This stretches the muscles in the left calf. Make certain to point the toes of both feet forward, not out to the side. Hold for 15 seconds. Switch sides and repeat. Do this twice more on each side.

‡ **Keep it low and slow.** Drastic changes in your running routine can cause Achilles problems. Don't rapidly increase your mileage or speed. And be careful not to overdo hill running or stair climbing, or run too much after a layoff.

‡ **Watch where you run.** Minimize training on unforgiving surfaces, such as cement and asphalt, as this can spell trouble for your Achilles. However, too-soft surfaces,

including grass or sand, can be problematic as well. "Many runners assume that running on a soft surface is ideal, but that's not always the case," says Richard Braver, D.P.M., a sports podiatrist in Englewood, N.J. "The sinking effect of running on sand, for example, causes the Achilles tendon to be stretched beyond its normal range, and the soft surface makes push-off more difficult." Cinder trails, dirt paths, synthetic tracks, and treadmills are better surfaces for your Achilles.

‡ **Improve your form.** Poor running technique can place extra stress on the Achilles. For example, you need to be careful if your foot initially hits the ground close to your toes (meaning you're a "forefoot striker"). This running style can strain the Achilles tendon, as the heel must lower itself to the ground with each stride. If this has caused chronic Achilles pain for you, you may want to practice running with a more heel-to-toe landing action.

### Treatment

As bad as Achilles tendinitis is—and it can be pretty bad—it's far worse to rupture the tendon. This can mean surgery, a cast, and months without running. And ignoring the early warning signs of Achilles tendinitis can lead to a rupture. "When your Achilles tendon first becomes sore, you must pay attention to it—immediately," says Dr. Pribut. That means,

don't try to run with the pain.

Achilles tendinitis is best treated with rest, ice, nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory medications such as aspirin or ibuprofen, and physical therapy. Therapeutic massage to the calf muscle is also helpful. "Calf massage will loosen up and improve the flexibility of the muscle fibers that attach to the heel bone via the Achilles," says Dr. Frey. But don't massage the Achilles itself if it's sore and inflamed.

While you're recovering from Achilles tendinitis, you can tape your lower leg (see "That's a Wrap" on page 32) to support your Achilles during those first critical days when you return to easy running. And custom-made orthotics or a heel lift inserted in your shoe can reduce stress on your sore tendon. Some doctors recommend an over-the-counter, closed-heel, elastic ankle brace to provide constant compression on the Achilles. This helps to reduce swelling.

"In the most severe cases, or those that don't respond to conservative treatment, we do an MRI to see if there is some death of the tendon, or even a partial tear," Dr. Frey says. "This may require casting or surgery."

Regardless, don't allow your physician to inject cortisone directly into your Achilles tendon. Cortisone can seriously weaken the taut bands of tissue in the Achilles, making it more prone to rupture. **R**



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