

# Achilles tendinopathy

Achilles tendinopathy used to be known as Achilles tendonitis. In general, 'itis' usually refers to inflammation, so tendonitis would mean inflammation of a tendon. However, achilles tendinopathy is now thought to be a better term to use because it is thought that there is little or no inflammation that causes the problem.

## What is the achilles tendon?

Your achilles tendon is an important part of your leg. It is found just behind and above your heel. It joins your heel bone (calcaneum) to your calf muscles. The function of your achilles tendon is to help in bending your foot downwards at the ankle.

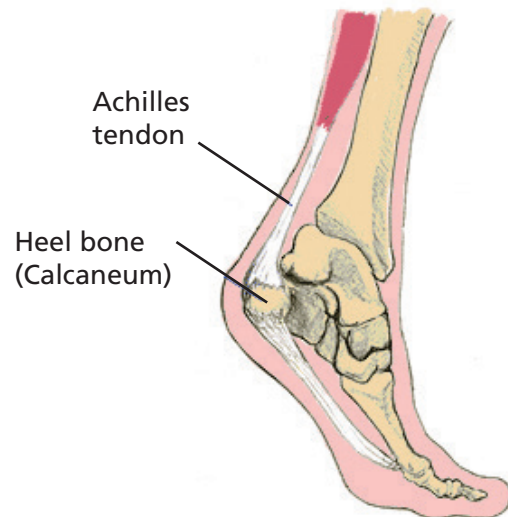
## What is achilles tendinopathy and what causes it?

Achilles tendinopathy is a condition that causes pain, swelling, stiffness and weakness of the achilles tendon. It is thought to be caused by repeated tiny injuries (known as microtrauma) to the achilles tendon. These build up over time and an achilles tendinopathy can develop.

There are a number of things that may lead to these repeated tiny injuries to the achilles tendon. For example:

- Overuse of the achilles tendon i.e. running, sport or dancing.
- Walking for prolonged periods in inappropriate footwear.
- Having poor flexibility - for example, having tight or underdeveloped hamstring or calf muscles.

Achilles tendinopathy is also more common in people who have certain types of arthritis, such as ankylosing spondylitis or psoriatic arthritis. It is also thought that genetics may play a part for some people who develop achilles tendinopathy.



Their genes seem to make them more likely to have problems with tendon healing after injury.

## What are the symptoms of achilles tendinopathy?

The main symptoms include pain and stiffness around the affected achilles tendon. Pain and stiffness tend to develop gradually and are usually worse when you first wake up in the morning. (Severe pain that comes on suddenly and difficulty walking can be a symptom of achilles tendon rupture. See a doctor urgently if you develop these symptoms.)

Some people have pain during exercise but, in general, pain is worse after exercise. You may notice that you have pain when you touch the area around your achilles tendon. There may also be some swelling around this area.

## Do I need any investigations?

Your healthcare professional will usually diagnose achilles tendinopathy from your typical symptoms and from examining your achilles tendon. They may feel for swelling or tenderness of the tendon. They may also ask you to do some exercises to put some stress on your achilles tendon.

X-rays or other tests are not needed to diagnose achilles tendinopathy. However, an ultrasound scan may be suggested by a health care professional if the diagnosis is not clear.

## What is the initial treatment for achilles tendinopathy?

There are a number of treatments that may help. The treatments below are usually suggested first.

### Rest

Rest and time off from sporting activities is important if you have Achilles tendinopathy. At first, you should stop any high-impact activities or sports (such as running). As pain improves, you can restart exercise as your pain allows. It is thought that complete rest, if it is prolonged, can actually be worse for the injury. Talk to your doctor about when you should start exercising again.

### Pain killers

Painkillers such as paracetamol or ibuprofen may help to relieve pain. (However always check with a doctor or pharmacist before taking any new medication). Ibuprofen is from a group of drugs called non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs). However, you should not use ibuprofen or other NSAIDs for more than 7-14 days if you have achilles tendinopathy, as this may slow the healing process in the long-term.

### Ice packs

These may be useful for pain control and may help to reduce swelling in the early stages of Achilles tendinopathy. An ice pack should be applied for 10-15 minutes. Always wrap an icepack in a damp cloth before applying it to prevent ice burns.

### Achilles tendon exercises

Some special exercises (eccentric load exercises) to help to stretch and strengthen your Achilles tendon can be helpful. You should aim to do these twice every day. Such exercises may help with pain control and stiffness. A physiotherapist or Podiatrist may be able to help you with these exercises as needed. These exercises are shown on the next page.

### Foot orthotics (orthoses)

Your health professional may suggest changing your footwear or putting special inserts in your shoes, such as inserts to lift your heel. This may help to reduce pain and symptoms.

## What happens if initial treatment fails?

For most people, the symptoms of achilles tendinopathy usually clear within 3-6 months of starting conservative treatment as described above. If your symptoms persist then your doctor may suggest that they refer you to a specialist sports medicine doctor or specialist orthopaedic surgeon.

## Specialist treatments that are not surgery

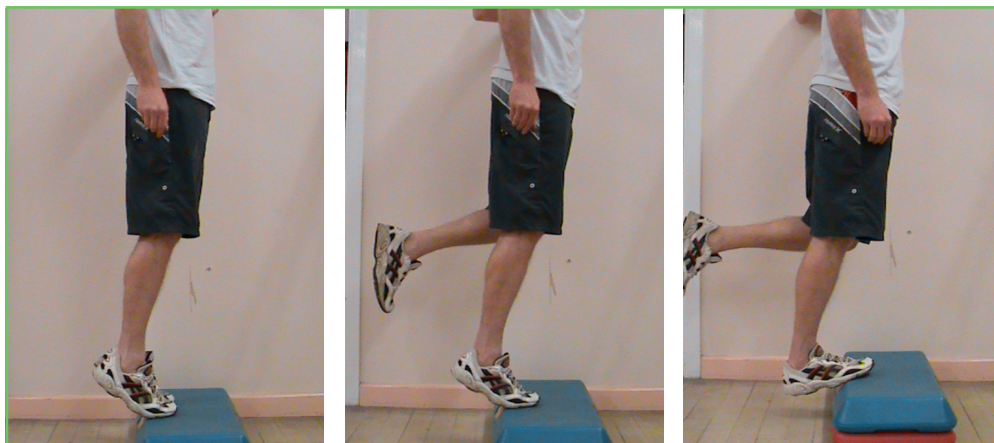
There are some treatments that some specialists may suggest to help treat achilles tendinopathy. You should discuss these treatments fully with your specialist, including their pros and cons, before any treatment is started.

A specific type of injection that may be used is a **high volume image guided saline (salt and water) injections**. This type of treatment is usually offered after you have gone through a 12 week conservative program which may include an eccentric loading and other exercises as well as heel inserts in your shoes. It is thought that when the achilles tendon remains swollen for several months, new nerve endings grow into the tendon causing persistent pain. The saline injection is thought to stop the new nerve endings from transmitting pain signals to the brain. This treatment injection also contains some steroid and local anaesthetic which can further reduce swelling and pain.

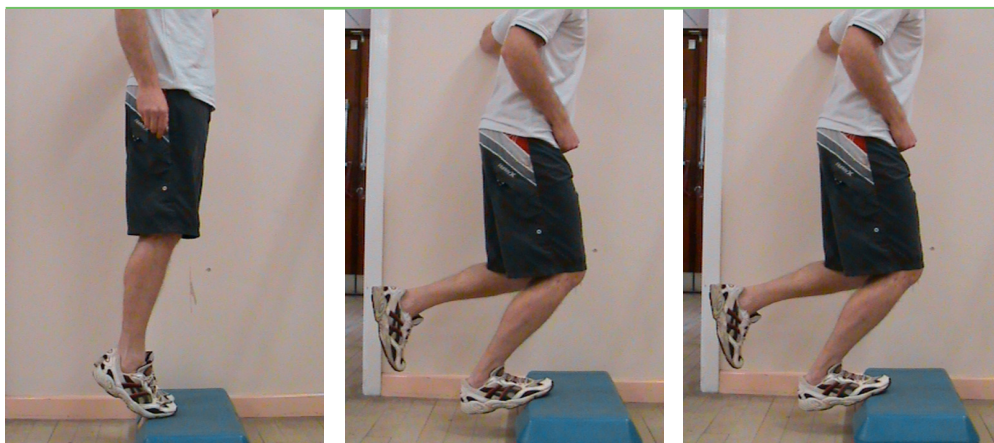
## Surgery for achilles tendinopathy

Rarely, people who have persisting pain due to achilles tendinopathy may require surgery to treat the condition. Most people have a good result from surgery and their pain is relieved. Complications from surgery are not common but, if they do occur, can include problems with wound healing.

## Exercises to help treat achilles tendinopathy



- Start in upright position bearing most weight through the uninjured leg.
- Swap to injured leg and then slowly lower your foot off the step keeping the injured leg straight. This should take about 8 seconds.
- Hold for a few seconds and then return to the starting position bearing your weight through your uninjured leg as you return to the start position.
- Repeat this exercise 15 times x 3 sets, twice a day (allow 15 seconds between each set).



- Repeat the exercise as above but with a bent knee.

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