

Common place shin pain is treatable

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By DR. ROBERT WEIL Columnist

The fall high school sports season is winding down and winter sports is gearing up and with it is the prevalence of shin pain in athletes' lower legs.

Shin splints isn't a medical term, but it's the one everyone uses. The problem is shin pain can be one of three or four different medical conditions. Muscle soreness, tendonitis, stress fracture or compartment pressure are all possible causes of shin pain.

These problems usually are on the front, inside or outside of the lower leg calf muscle and Achilles tendon on the back of the lower leg aren't considered shin splint areas.

Almost anyone running or jumping can be susceptible to shin pain.

Usually doing too much too soon, or increasing intensity of running activities on hard dry ground, or hard surface conditions can cause discomfort.

Backing off somewhat, usually some ice massage or ice packs, also sometimes heat when indicated, can help the problem.

If these don't help, then a proper specific diagnosis is important. X-rays and MRI tests might be necessary to rule out a stress fracture.

Young growing bodies moving from middle school sports to high school might be doing twice the amount and intensity. If pain persists, get it evaluated. Often "intelligent rest" is needed.

What's interesting is that almost all persistent shin problems are foot related. Both pronated flat feet and the other extreme, high arches can be foot types that aggravate and perpetuate if not cause shin splint type conditions.

If the complaint is "every time my son or daughter gets really into the sports season their shin splints return" then check out the foot mechanics.

The shin muscles and tendons act as "the breaks" to slow down the foot, ankle and lower leg coming down from a jump or hitting the ground running. If the proper stability and alignment of the foot is off, then those lower leg muscles and tendons are overused or bones are stressed.

Shin splints are common in all ages in all running, jumping activities -- one of the often referred to overuse injuries. Prescription in-shoe orthotics are very helpful when foot mechanics are involved.

Again, most persistent and resistant shin problems are foot related. Treatments often include physical therapy, anti-inflammatory medicine and strengthening exercises.

Last month I wrote about stepping up your foot exercises -- all of those rubber band and balance exercises work all the shin muscles. Prevent problems -- do the exercise.

Being in the proper shoes is always important. Knowing the foot type, especially in running, is also important. Sports related podiatrists, therapists, trainers and a competent running shoe store all can identify foot types. You'd be surprised how many athletes at all levels are not in properly fit shoes. Get measured. Call on the excellence at Naperville Running Co. or Dick Pond Athletics for running shoes.

Some e-mails:

Bob, Elmhurst-- I'm a 53 year-old jogger who's run 15-20 miles a week for over 10 years. I know I have pronated feet and have used the proper motion control shoes recommended by a running shoe store. My question is about my 2-3 year history of back problems. Can this be pronation related?

Dr. Weil-- Yes it can and it's more common than you think. Have your foot mechanics checked by a sports podiatrist or therapist. Orthotics very often are helpful especially when combined with the proper therapy.

Sam, Aurora-- My 13-year-old daughter dances hip hop and modern dance 4-to-5 days a week. Her dancing is very acrobatic and her heels have bothered her on and off for over six months. We've tried gel pads but still there's a problem. Her pediatrician says rest-anything else?

Dr. Weil-- Large back of heel growth centers are susceptible to stress until growth is over (another 1 ½-2 years). "Intelligent rest" absolutely is important, but physical therapy, proper strapping, and inserts can help. Often foot type contributes to stress to the heels, so have her evaluated.

Dr. Robert Weil is a sports podiatrist from Naperville with an office in Aurora. You can hear him on his weekly radio show at 6:30 p.m. Thursdays on 90.9-FM. Contact him at drweilsportsdoctor@yahoo.com and visit his Web site at sportsdoctorradio.com.