

Shin splints is a problem that can be treated and prevented

The fall high school sports season is in full swing 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 that 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

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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 exercises.

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.

Check out my radio show on Thursday for a replay of a recent interview with Tanya Lysacek, the mother of reigning U.S. figure skating champion and Naperville native Evan Lysacek.

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