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Achilles Bursitis

Achilles bursitis is caused by tissue damage and inflammation of the Achilles bursa (a small fluid filled sac located at the back of the heel) causing pain in the heel region.

A bursa is a very thin fluid filled sac found in various places throughout the body. Bursae are filled with lubricating fluid and are designed to reduce friction between adjacent layers of tissue. They are located in regions of the body where tissue layers may rub against each other or against bony prominences.

The calf is made up of 2 major muscles. One of them originates from above the knee joint (gastrocnemius), the other originates from below the knee joint (soleus). Both of these muscles insert into the heel bone via the Achilles tendon.



During contraction of the calf, tension is placed through the Achilles tendon and this rubs against the Achilles bursa. Rubbing of objects against the heel such as excessively tight shoes can also increase friction on the Achilles bursa. Consequently, too much repetition or high force causes irritation and inflammation of the bursa known as Achilles bursitis. Occasionally this condition may develop following trauma such as a direct impact to the Achilles Bursa.

Typically, there is pain at the back of the ankle or heel during activities requiring strong or repetitive calf contractions such as walking (especially uphill), going up and down stairs, running, jumping or hopping. Often pain may be worse with rest after these activities (especially that night or the following morning).

Pain may also increase when wearing either loose or excessively tight shoes that rub against the Achilles bursa. Other symptoms may include swelling in the local area and tenderness on firmly touching the Achilles bursa.

Prognosis of Achilles bursitis

Most patients with Achilles bursitis heal well with appropriate physiotherapy. Minor cases that have not been present for long can usually recover within a few weeks. In patients with severe symptoms or those who have had their condition for a long period of time, recovery can be a lengthy process and may take a number of months. Early treatment is vital to hasten recovery and improve the outcome.

Physiotherapy for Achilles bursitis

Treatment may comprise:

- footwear advice and / or orthotics prescription
- soft tissue massage
- dry needling
- stretches and or joint mobilisation
- Electrotherapy - Radial Pressure Wave therapy, Ultrasound, InterX, Interferential therapy
- anti-inflammatory advice
- the use of crutches
- the use of heel wedges
- arch support taping
- the use of a compression bandage
- ice or heat treatment
- exercises to improve strength, flexibility and balance
- activity modification advice
- biomechanical correction
- a graduated return to activity program

Other intervention for Achilles bursitis

Despite appropriate physiotherapy management, some patients with Achilles bursitis do not improve adequately. When this occurs, the following may be necessary: corticosteroid and anaesthetic injection into the Achilles bursa, drainage of the bursa, further investigations such as an ultrasound, X-Ray, MRI or CT scan, pharmaceutical intervention or review by a specialist or podiatrist who can advise on any treatment that may be appropriate to improve the condition.