Achilles Tendinopathy (Mid-portion)

What is Achilles tendinopathy?
Achilles tendinopathy or tendinitis is a term that has been used for many years to describe pain, swelling and thickening around the Achilles tendon. Achilles tendinopathy often occurs when sudden unexpected load is placed upon the tendon. (It’s important to mention that a sudden change in loading behaviour is often what can cause an initial reaction in Achilles tendinopathy). The key is to optimise stress and load to the tendon and slowly increase this to build the tendon stronger.

What are the symptoms?
If you develop Achilles tendinopathy, you may experience localised pain in either the attachment of the tendon on the heel, or in the middle of the tendon itself. People sometimes describe an ache that occurs after exercise and/or at the end of the day. You may also notice localised swelling or thickening within the tendon, which can be worse first thing in morning when stress or load is placed on the tendon.

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Who gets Achilles tendinopathy?

Achilles tendinopathy has been researched extensively \(^\text{[1],[3]}\) and is the most common overuse injury in the lower limb \(^\text{[1]}\).

You are more likely to experience symptoms if you apply repetitive loading to the Achilles with activities such as running and jumping or have muscle weakness in the lower limbs and are overweight. Sudden changes in activities can also be a cause.

What can I do?

Most Achilles tendon problems are treated conservatively and treatment can consist of several months of tailored exercise \(^\text{[2]}\).

When you **first** experience Achilles pain **(1-3 weeks)** try:

- Anti-inflammatory painkillers as advised by your local pharmacist or GP
- Cold compress or ice pack – crushed ice wrapped in a damp towel can be applied locally to the painful area for 10 minutes, every two to three hours. Check your skin regularly, if the skin turns excessively red or white, remove immediately as this may indicate an ice burn
- Supportive footwear (ideally a sports trainer or a laced up shoe with a thick supportive sole)
- A small heel raise pad (can be purchased at most pharmacists)
- Relative rest if you are completing an intense exercise programme or been participating in intensive activity
  
  1. Achilles stretches
  2. Isometric Exercises

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If the symptoms do not settle after 2-3 weeks or you have had long term Achilles pain (>12 weeks) try:

1) Heel drop exercises

1. Stretches

Stand in a walking position with the leg to be stretched straight behind you and the other leg bent in front of you. Take support from a wall or chair. Lean your body forwards and down until you feel the stretching in the calf of the straight leg. Hold approx. 30 seconds. Repeat 3 times.

Stand in a walking position with the leg to be stretched behind you. Hold on to a support. Bend the leg to be stretched and let the weight of your body stretch your calf without lifting the heel off the floor. Hold approx. 30 seconds. Repeat 3 times.

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2. Isometric Exercises

Sit in a chair with your feet touching the floor. Push toes down to raise the heel as shown. At the same time, press your body weight downward on your knee to resist the motion. Hold this contraction for 5 seconds. Repeat between 5-30 repetitions depending on pain levels. This is repeated 3-4 x daily.

3. Heel drop exercises

Stand on the edge of a step.
Lift your heels.

Lift your good leg and slowly lower the bad leg (heel) of the other leg to the same level as the step.

To progress this exercise:-
- drop your heel below the level of the step
- increase the speed of the movement
- add weights

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Repeat this for **10-15 repetitions**. This can be repeated another two to three times with a minute rest in between. This exercise is typically completed twice a day and is often completed every other day. A little discomfort with exercise is expected and a normal part of the exercise programme.

This exercise programme is typically completed for **6-12 weeks** before improvement in pain may occur. If your pain does improve with this programme you are recommended to continue the exercise program for **6-12 months**.
References:

