

## Exercise-Related Pain – Is It Telling You Something?

**P**AIN – Not a very popular word in an exerciser’s vocabulary. Pain associated with exercise often translates into injury...and serious injury means that your exercising days may be numbered. For lack of understanding or perhaps simple stubbornness, the warning sign of pain is often ignored or misinterpreted and activity continues. For the lucky few, continued activity may not present a problem; but for the vast majority of others, the effects can be disastrous... resulting in serious injury.

Unfortunately, exercise pain is not always easily interpreted. Pain is, after all, a personal thing. No one can tell you what you are feeling. We all know that a certain amount of discomfort is common up to 48 hours after exercise, whereas, chest pain during exercise is readily recognized as a “red flag” situation. But what about that nagging ache in your knee, or that sudden sharp burning sensation in your shoulder? This is the type of pain associated with exercise-related injuries. Does it warrant a doctor’s visit or should you just lay off exercising for a few days and see what happens?

A small understanding of some common exercise-related injuries may help you evaluate exercise pain if it should occur. Most of these injuries respond well to rest and ice.

### **Tendinitis**

Tendons are comprised of fibrous connective tissue, which attach muscles to bones. Over use of the extremities can result in an inflammation of a tendon. Tendinitis is very common and is easily treated with rest and ice. If ignored, however, the condition can worsen to the point of needing surgical repair. The pain is usually of a nagging nature, felt over a general area and is sometimes accompanied by swelling.

### **Strains**

A stretch or tear of the muscle-tendon unit constitutes a strain. The symptoms are similar to tendinitis. The severity of the injury is measured in degrees. A first-degree strain results from a stretching of the muscle-tendon fibers. A second-degree strain is a partial tear of the unit fibers and a third-degree strain is an actual rupture of the whole unit.

### **Sprains**

A sprain is an injury similar to a strain; however, ligaments that attach bones to bones are involved instead of tendons.

### **Bursitis**

A bursa is a fluid-filled sac that acts as a cushion between two structures that slide past each other near a joint. When a joint is overused, the bursa may become irritated and inflamed, resulting in intermittent pain usually after exercise. You can often pinpoint the pain. Shoulders and knees are most often affected by bursitis.

### **Stress Fractures**

When muscle, tendon and ligament injuries are ignored, these structures can no longer do an effective job in protecting the bones they surround. This leaves the bone defenseless against over-zealous workouts. Quite often hairline cracks called stress fractures will develop in the bone. The pain associated with a stress fracture is felt at a very specific point away from the joint and usually occurs only after activity.

### **Do You Feel Pain?**

Once you have an idea about your exercise pain, use this guide to help determine your course of action. (If ever in doubt, see your doctor ASAP!) First, ask yourself whether the pain happened immediately or did it develop gradually over time?

### **For Sudden Pain, Ask Yourself**

Is the pain severe and constant? Does a bruise or discoloration accompany it? Did you hear a “pop” or a “snap” in the injured area?

If you answered “yes” to any of the above, Go directly to your doctor. You may have sustained a serious sprain, strain or stress fracture.

### **For Gradually Developing Pain, Ask Yourself**

Can the pain be pinpointed to a specific location and is the area painful only after the activity?

If you answered “yes,” go directly to your doctor. You may have developed bursitis or a stress fracture.

If you feel the pain over a generalized area, treat according to rest and ice guidelines for 48 hours. If the pain continues, see your doctor as soon as possible. You may have a serious sprain or strain. Pain indicates distress to the body – listen and take action. Resting and icing or a timely trip to the doctor may mean the difference between a few short days of rest and many months of inactivity.