

SHIN SPLINTS – Spirit of the African Runner’s newsletter

What are “shin splints”? “Shin splints” is the general name given to pain at the front of the lower leg. It is not a diagnosis in itself but a description of symptoms of which there could be a number of causes. The most common cause is inflammation of the periosteum of the tibia (sheath surrounding the bone). Traction forces occur from the muscles of the lower leg on the periosteum causing pain and inflammation.

Tips to prevent shin splints

There are a number of things that may contribute to shin pain and below I have outlined seven simple tips to help avoid sore shins this summer:

1. Gradually introduce track or hard surface training. Limit training on hard surfaces - particularly at this time of year when many track runners will increase the amount of time spent on the track. Constant pounding on hard surfaces will send shock waves up the leg and increase the strain on the soft tissues. Too much running on the toes (essential for sprinters) may over-stress the muscles of the lower leg and increase the chance of developing shin pain.
2. Wear shock-absorbing insoles such as the Sorbothane prosole which are designed to fit in running spikes. They will reduce impact and shock vibrations transferred up the lower leg to the soft tissues. Also, ensure your running shoes/spikes are in good condition. A running shoe will lose a lot of its shock-absorbing capacity after 400 miles of running or six months.
3. Over-pronation or other biomechanical foot problems may also increase your chances of developing shin pain. As the foot rolls in then the lower leg rotates inwards, again, increasing the forces on the lower leg. If you suspect over-pronation or “flat feet” to be a problem then see a podiatrist who can give a full biomechanical assessment and recommend orthotic type insoles to correct the problem. It is just as important, if not more important to correct foot motion at all times – not just when training.
4. Stretch the calf and other lower leg muscles. Tension in these muscles is a common contributor to shin splints and keeping these muscles flexible and in good condition is essential so they can cope with the forces demanded of them.
5. Get a regular sports massage. Regular deep tissue massage can work wonders in helping to keep the muscles of the lower leg in good condition. A good therapist will identify tight knots, lumps, bumps and areas of tension long before they may develop into an injury.
6. Apply ice after training. If you feel at risk of developing sore shins then applying ice or cold therapy after each training session for 10 to 15 minutes can help keep any inflammation under control before it develops further.

7. Tape the shins. A simple taping technique exists that can help to support the lower leg and relieve shin pain. Do not rely on this alone in the long term if you have an injury. However, it can be useful in helping tissues to recover from hard training.

Recommendation

If you do develop shin pain then see a specialist who can advise on treatment and rehabilitation.