What is an Achilles tendinitis?

The Achilles tendon is a band of tissue that connects the heel bone to the calf muscle of the leg. This band of tissue/tendon may become inflamed and cause pain or ‘tendinitis’. 
How common is Achilles tendinitis?

About 6 in 100 inactive people develop Achilles tendinitis at some point in their lifetime. It is also more common in men than in women and typically tends to affect men between the ages of 30-40.

How does it occur?

Achilles tendinitis can be caused by:
- Overuse of the Achilles tendon.
- Tight calf muscles.
- Tight Achilles tendons.
- Lots of uphill running.
- Increasing the amount or intensity of sports training.
- Over-pronation, a problem where your feet roll inward and flatten out more than normal when you walk or run.
- Wearing high heels at work and then switching to lower-heeled shoes for exercise.

What are the symptoms?

Achilles tendinitis causes pain and may cause swelling over the Achilles tendon. The tendon is tender and may be swollen. You will have pain when you rise up on your toes and pain when you stretch the tendon. The range of motion of your ankle may be limited.

There is a risk of rupturing your Achilles tendon if you have Achilles tendinitis. This is because the tendon is damaged and weaker than usual. However, this risk is usually quite low. Severe pain around the Achilles tendon that develops suddenly may be a sign of tendon rupture. See a doctor urgently if you think that you may have ruptured your Achilles tendon.

How long will the effects last?

For most people, the symptoms of Achilles tendinitis usually clear within 3-6 months of starting treatment. Recovery time depends on the severity of the injury.

What is the treatment for Achilles tendinitis?

This condition can be largely self-managed following the advice below:
Rest
Raise your lower leg on a pillow when you are lying down. While you are recovering from your injury, change your sport or activity to one that does not make your condition worse. For example, you may need to swim instead of run. As pain improves, you can restart exercise as your pain allows.

Ice packs
Put ice packs on the Achilles tendon for 10 minutes every 3 to 4 hours for the first 2 or 3 days or until the pain goes away. These may be useful for pain control and may help to reduce swelling in the early stages of Achilles tendinitis. Make an ice pack by wrapping ice cubes in a plastic bag or towel or using a bag of frozen peas. (Do not put ice directly next to skin as it may cause ice burn.)

Painkillers
Painkillers such as paracetamol or ibuprofen may help to relieve pain. Check with your doctor or pharmacist before taking painkillers to make sure they are suitable for you.

Orthotics
A heel lift insert for your shoe or specialist orthotics can be worn at least until your tendon heals and possibly longer. The lift prevents extra stretching of your Achilles tendon. You can buy orthotics at a pharmacy or athletic shoe store or they can be custom-made.

Achilles tendon exercises
Some special exercises to help to stretch and strengthen your Achilles tendon can be helpful. Such exercises may help with pain control and stiffness.

You can do the towel stretch right away. When the towel stretch is too easy, try the standing calf stretch and soleus stretch. When you no longer have sharp pain in your calf or tendon, you can do the step-up and heel raises.

If the exercises make the pain worse then reduce the number of times you do the exercises. If at any time your symptoms change or worsen you must stop any exercises / self-management and consult your doctor.
**Towel stretch:**
Keep a towel (or a long piece of elastic) by the side of your bed. First thing in the morning, before you get out of bed, sit with one leg stretched out in front of you. Loop a towel around your toes and the ball of your foot. Pull the towel toward your body keeping your knee straight. This exercise will pull your toes and the upper part of your foot towards you. Hold this position for 15 to 30 seconds then relax. Repeat 3 times.

**Standing calf stretch:**
Facing a wall, put your hands against the wall at about eye level. Keep one leg back with the heel on the floor, and the other leg forward. Turn your back foot slightly inward (as if you were pigeon-toed) as you slowly lean into the wall until you feel a stretch in the back of your calf. Hold for 15 to 30 seconds. Repeat 3 times and then switch the position of your legs and repeat the exercise 3 times. Do this exercise several times each day.

**Standing soleus stretch:**
Stand facing a wall with your hands on a wall at about chest level. With both knees slightly bent and one foot back, gently lean into the wall until you feel a stretch in your lower calf. Angle the toes of your back foot slightly inward and keep your heel down on the floor. Hold this for 15 to 30 seconds. Return to the starting position. Repeat 3 times.

**Step-up:**
Stand with the foot of your injured leg on a support (like a small step or block of wood) 3 to 5 inches high. Keep your other foot flat on the floor. Shift your weight onto your injured leg on the support straighten your knee as the other leg comes off the floor. Lower your leg back to the floor slowly. Do 3 sets of 10.
How can I prevent Achilles tendinitis?

The best way to prevent Achilles tendon injury is to stretch your calf muscles and Achilles tendons before exercise. If you have tight Achilles tendons or calf muscles, stretch them twice a day whether or not you are doing any sports activities that day.

What happens if initial treatment fails?

For most people, the symptoms of Achilles tendinitis usually clear within 3-6 months of starting treatment as described above. If however your symptoms remain speak to your doctor. Your doctor may advise seeing a physiotherapist or consider a referral to a specialist.

A note about steroid injections

The use of steroid injections for the treatment of Achilles tendinitis is controversial. If steroids are injected directly into the Achilles tendon, there is a risk of damaging the tendon further and there have been cases where they have caused the tendon to rupture. Another option is to inject the steroid around the Achilles tendon. It is thought that this may have less effect on the tendon itself and be less likely to cause damage, especially if injecting the steroid using an ultrasound scan to guide the needle to the right position.

Remember: There is a risk of rupturing your Achilles tendon if you have Achilles tendinitis. This is because the tendon is damaged and weaker than usual. However, this risk is usually quite low. Severe pain around the Achilles tendon that develops suddenly may be a sign of tendon rupture. See a doctor urgently if you think that you may have ruptured your Achilles tendon.
References

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