

Five things you should know about Achilles tendon injuries

A vital but easily overlooked part of the body, the Achilles tendon can cause immense pain if damaged. Orthopaedic surgeon *Adeel Memon* shares the key signs to look out for

Achilles tendon injuries, as seen in the case of Irish Olympic hopeful Ciara Mageean, can be painful, both physically and mentally, and are unfortunately all too common.

If not treated correctly, it could significantly impact an athlete's career – but this doesn't have to be the case according to Adeel Memon, Consultant Orthopaedic Surgeon at Mater Private Network.

Whether you're a professional athlete, a fitness enthusiast, or simply someone who enjoys staying active, understanding an Achilles tendon injury is crucial for prevention and recovery. Here are the five key things EVERYONE should know.

1. Understanding the Achilles tendon: what it is and why it matters

The Achilles tendon is one of the most utilised tendons in the human body, connecting the calf muscles to the heel bone. This tendon plays a crucial role in enabling various movements, such as walking, running, and jumping, by providing the power needed to push off the ground.

Due to its constant use, the Achilles tendon is under considerable stress, making it susceptible to injuries. This is especially true in individuals who engage in repetitive or high-intensity physical activities.

Given its importance, an injury to

the Achilles tendon can severely impact mobility and overall quality of life. It's not just athletes who need to be cautious; anyone engaging in physical activity should be aware of the risks and take steps to prevent damage.

2. Common causes of Achilles tendon injuries: overuse and trauma

Achilles tendon injuries often occur due to overuse or trauma such as a high-impact injury, or repetitive use strain. Repeated stress on the tendon can lead to micro-tears, which, if not properly managed, can result in more severe injuries. This type of overuse injury is prevalent among athletes.

Another group of at-risk individuals includes "weekend warriors" – individuals who may not engage in regular physical activity but participate in high-intensity exercise or sports at the weekend. These sporadic bouts of strenuous activity can place undue

strain on the Achilles tendon, particularly in individuals in their 30s and 40s, who might not have the same conditioning as younger sporting enthusiasts.

If either of these cohorts strikes a chord with you, recognising these risk factors is essential to injury prevention.

3. Recognising the symptoms: early detection is key

The symptoms of an Achilles tendon injury can vary depending on the severity of the damage, but they often include a sudden sharp pain in the lower leg. Many individuals describe the sensation as if they were kicked in the back of the leg. Symptoms are typically pain, swelling and difficulty bearing weight on the affected limb.

Early detection of these symptoms is crucial for effective treatment. While the body has a natural ability to heal,

an untreated tendon rupture can lead to long-term complications, such as chronic pain, weakness in the tendon, restricted movement, or even permanent mobility issues later in life.

Prompt medical attention ensures that the injury is diagnosed correctly, and that appropriate treatment to facilitate healing is administered by knowledgeable clinicians.

4. Prevention strategies: how to protect your Achilles tendon

Preventing Achilles tendon injuries is largely about maintaining good physical conditioning and being mindful of how you exercise.

For athletes and active individuals, incorporating proper warm-ups and stretching routines into their regimen is vital. Gradually increasing the intensity of workouts, rather than jumping into high-intensity activities, can also help prevent overuse injuries.

Footwear plays a significant role in preventing Achilles tendon injuries. Shoes that provide adequate support and cushioning can reduce the strain on the tendon. Additionally, avoiding uneven or hard surfaces during exercise can minimise the risk of trauma to the area, maintaining overall tendon health.

5. Treatment and recovery: what to expect

Treatment for an Achilles tendon injury varies depending on the severity of

the injury and the individual's activity level. In cases of a complete rupture, surgical repair is often the route taken by athletes, as it reduces the risk of the tendon elongating during the healing process.

Surgery is typically followed by a period of immobilisation to allow the tendon to heal, after which a gradual rehabilitation programme is

implemented.

For less severe injuries or for those who opt for non-surgical treatment, a combination of rest, immobilisation, and physiotherapy is typically prescribed.

Early active rehabilitation is a critical component of the recovery process, no matter your treatment pathway, as it focuses on restoring strength, flexibility, and function to the affected tendon.

For the patients treated by my team at Mater Private Network in Cork, working with a physiotherapist to ensure consistency in patient recovery has been a gamechanger. Providing tailored rehabilitation programmes for each patient, focusing on strengthening the tendon and surrounding muscles in order to serve their recovery goals, and providing access to a multi-disciplinary team has yielded effective results.

The main takeaway: what to keep in mind

- Achilles tendon injuries are common but serious injuries; if left untreated, it can have a lasting impact on your daily life.
- Understanding the importance of prevention, maintenance and where to seek attention in a timely manner if an Achilles injury does occur, is essential to recovery.
- It's also important to remember that recovery from an Achilles tendon injury can be a lengthy process, often taking between three to six months, so the sooner you seek help, the sooner you can be back out, actively enjoying your favourite pastime.

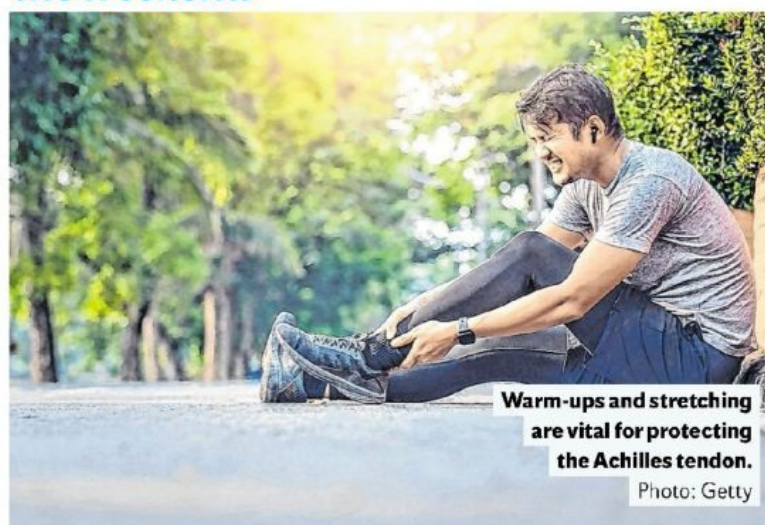
Whether through proper

conditioning, mindful exercise habits, or prompt medical attention when needed, taking care of your Achilles tendons is essential for maintaining an active and healthy lifestyle.

Mr. Adeel Memon is a fellowship-trained Consultant Orthopaedic Surgeon at Mater Private Network in Cork.

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At-risk individuals include 'weekend warriors' who participate in high-intensity exercise at the weekend



Warm-ups and stretching are vital for protecting the Achilles tendon.

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