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Controversy regarding stretching Achilles for treatment of heel pain

Heel pain is a common malady runner's experience. A Google search using for the keywords plantar fasciitis (heel pain) and stretching listed 9,740 web pages. Looking at the first 10 web pages all suggested weight bearing Achilles stretching as treatment for heel pain. The American Orthopedic Foot and Ankle Society recommends stretching calf muscles as a standard treatment for pain on the bottom of the heel (2001).

However a recent study by B.F. DiGovanni (2003) questions whether Achilles stretching exercises are helpful for treatment of plantar fasciitis. He examined 100 patients who had plantar fasciitis for more than 10 months duration. All were treated with prefabricated soft insole, and medication. Half did weight bearing stretching exercises for the Achilles tendon, and half did non-weight bearing stretching exercises specific for the plantar fascia.



Non weight bearing stretch of the plantar fascia

There was greater improvement in the group who did non-weight bearing stretching exercises specific for the plantar fascia, in comparison to the weight bearing Achilles stretching group.

LD Barry (2001) looked at 160 patients with heel pain and concluded using a night splint without standing stretching of the Achilles speeds the time to recovery.

Daniel Riddle (2003) looked at 50 subjects (8 were runners) in a controlled study and concluded individuals who have decreased range of motion at the ankles consistent with a short Achilles tendon are 23 times more likely to experience plantar fasciitis. Dan teaches Physical Therapy at the Medical College of Virginia. His research provides indirect support to the generally accepted opinion that treatment of plantar fasciitis should include weight bearing stretching exercises for the Achilles. Dan points out that it could not be determined from his study whether the individuals developed a short Achilles after the onset of the disorder or whether they had a short Achilles leading to the development of the disorder.

If an Achilles become short, why does this happen? It makes sense to me if you wear high heel shoes a majority of the time the Achilles will become short. It could be argued that extensive amount of running leads to over development and a shortening of the Achilles, but I have not seen evidence to support this, yet. Controversy continues regarding the recommendation to treat plantar fasciitis with calf stretching or not. Until more research is available to resolve this controversy my recommendation is, if there is evidence the Achilles is short it should be stretched, if there is no evidence (limited range of motion at the ankle) the Achilles is short than it should not be stretched.