

Shin pain

Mamae ā-tāhau

Leg pain along the front of your leg between your knee and ankle (your shin) is commonly called shin splints. The medical name for it is medial tibial stress.

Pain from shin splints is worse when you exercise and gets better when you rest. Doctors don't know exactly why shin splints happen. They tend to be because of overuse and typically happen in runners.

Some things seem to make shin splints more likely. These include:

- hard running surfaces or running up an incline
- previous leg injuries
- poorly fitted or inadequate running shoes that don't support your foot and ankle.

Some muscle and structural problems with your lower leg and foot might also make shin splints more likely. These include:

- rolling your foot too much (also called overpronation)
- overuse injury of the tendons in your leg (called tendinopathy)
- small tears in the membrane between your lower leg bones (your tibia and fibula)
- muscle sprains
- an inflamed membrane around your tibia and fibula (called periostitis)
- tiny fractures in your tibia.



Preventing shin splints

Using shock-absorbent insoles in your training shoes, graduated running programmes (building your training up slowly so your body has time to adjust) and regularly replacing your training footwear may help you avoid getting shin splints.

Self-care for shin splints

There are several things you can do yourself to treat shin splints and in mild cases you won't need to see a health professional. If you follow this advice, your symptoms should get much better within seven to 10 days and you should be able to slowly build up your level of activity.

Rest

Rest is the main treatment for shin splints. This means avoiding any activity, such as running, which hurts or may have led to the shin splints. You should rest for seven to 10 days.



Ice and elevation

Applying ice to your shin and raising your leg (elevation) may also help to lessen the pain. Do both for 15 to 20 minutes two to three times a day.

Ice slows down blood flow to the injured area, which helps to reduce the pain. Raising your leg helps to reduce the swelling. You can make an ice pack by wrapping ice cubes in a plastic bag or towel or using a bag of frozen peas. Don't put the ice directly on your skin, as it can cause an ice burn.

Gently press the ice onto the painful part of your leg.

To elevate your leg when you're sitting down, put it up on a chair, at least as high as your hips. It may be easier to lie on a sofa and put your foot on some cushions. When you're in bed, put a pillow under your feet.

Pain relief

Paracetamol (Panadol) can help to reduce your pain. Take it for three to four days according to the instructions on the packet. If pain is still a problem after that, consult your health professional.

You can also use anti-inflammatory pain relief, such as ibuprofen (Nurofen) or diclofenac (Voltaren). These medicines are also called non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, or NSAIDs. As well as relieving pain, they limit inflammation.

But NSAIDs can have some serious side effects, especially if you take them for a long time. Two serious side effects are stomach pain and bleeding from your stomach. Some people with asthma, high blood pressure, kidney failure and heart failure might not even be able to take them for a short time. If you aren't sure if you can take NSAIDs, check with your doctor or pharmacist.

Stretches

You can gently stretch the area by bending your foot down until you can feel a pull through the sore area. Hold this for 30 seconds to one minute and repeat it two to three times a day. The long calf stretch and short calf stretch will also help. For how to do these stretches, go to www.healthinfo.org.nz and search for "ankles stretch".

Getting help for shin splints

If your symptoms are severe, continuous, don't go away or get worse, see your general practice team, physiotherapist or podiatrist.

Stress fractures

A stress fracture in your tibia can also cause pain that's very similar to shin splints. Stress fractures tend to happen because of overuse. If your pain has become more constant rather than just happening with activity, see your general practice team or physiotherapist as you may have a stress fracture.

Written by HealthInfo clinical advisers. Last reviewed July 2022.