

COOL YOUR HEELS DURING OFF-SEASON

R. STEPHEN LUCIE, M.D.

Former Head Team Physician, Jacksonville Jaguars

In addition to the routine bumps and bruises and more serious injuries obtained in games and practices, Jaguars players were suffering from a lot of overuse injuries at the end of the 1995 season. These players had been working at maximum capacity since the beginning of July, and many had developed pains and problems which just won't go away until the long-needed rest in the off-season.

One of the most prevalent problems is heel pain, occurring among many weekend warriors and recreational athletes as well as among our Jaguars. Heel spur syndrome is a constellation of disorders that manifests itself in the common symptom of pain in the heel. The recommended treatment will vary as the attending physician evaluates and diagnoses the specific injury.

The majority of heel pain cases are planter fasciitis, or heel pain syndrome, which describes pain on the sole of the foot at the heel. This occurs where the arch or planter fascia attaches to your heel. Other common heel injuries include insertional Achilles tendonitis, which causes pain in the back of the heel where the Achilles tendon inserts, and retrocalcaneal bursitis, marked by pain just under the Achilles tendon. The accompanying illustration indicates each of the primary heel injuries.

Heel spur syndrome typically causes more pain early in the morning. This is a common disorder in recreational runners and walker and overweight individuals. Many of these people have a slightly abnormal configuration of their foot, either very high arches or flat feet. For football players and long-distance runners, this condition may occur simply due to overuse.

The treatment yielding the most satisfactory results consist of nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory medication such as ibuprofen, naproxen, or aspirin. A physical therapy program incorporating ultrasound, massage, stretching and hot and cold modalities yields improvement in many patients. Orthotics, either over-the-counter or custom, may be helpful depending on the type of abnormality in the foot. Injections of steroids and local anesthetics also may help, but can also be quite unpleasant.

Surgery is usually reserved for only for those cases in which other therapy fails to yield results after six months. Insertional planter fasciitis may also be treated with anti-inflammatory medication and physical therapy, but often immobilization in the form of a cast or fracture boot may be necessary.

Retrocalcaneal bursitis responds similarly but often requires a local steroid and anesthetic injection.

Prevention of heel injuries centers on the use of proper shoe wear. We often recommend that people not run or walk without proper fitting running shoes. Running shoes offer the best heel technology and cushion.

Finally remember that rest is the best therapy for overuse injuries. This is often the most bitter pill to swallow for athletes of all types, but, as the Jaguars finish their inaugural season, the best prescription for off season rest and chance to rejuvenate their banged-up bodies.

Jan 9, 1996

Jaguars Inside Report