

Stress Fractures

Stress fractures are very small cracks in a bone which occur in response to prolonged, high-impact, repetitive activity. While virtually any bone in the body may experience a stress fracture, most occur in the lower leg and foot. Activities or sports which require a lot of running, particularly on hard surfaces, are most apt to cause a stress fracture.

Often, injury to other body tissue precedes a stress fracture. Over time, repetitive strain on the legs may lead to tendonitis or muscular injury. Symptoms include pain with or following activity (often similar to shin splints) in the lower legs or feet. If these signs are ignored, the bones are the next tissue to break down in the form of tiny cracks or fractures. Swelling may or may not be present. Often, there will be tenderness directly over the affected bone.

Like other fractures, stress injuries may be diagnosed with x-rays. However, particularly recent or small stress fractures may not show up. Sometimes a second series of x-rays or a bone scan will be required to make the diagnosis. A bone scan detects areas of high metabolic activity which are present following a fracture.

The treatment for stress fractures varies considerably from other traditional types of fractures occurring due to trauma. Seldom is a stress fracture ever casted. Rather, treatment focuses on reducing or modifying activity in order to allow the fracture to heal. For example, a runner with a stress fracture may continue his/her conditioning program by swimming rather than running. This reduces the weight-bearing impact on the bones of the lower leg and will allow healing to take place. The runner may then gradually resume his/her usual activity over a period of weeks after the fracture heals.

Follow these guidelines to reduce your risk of developing stress fractures:

- Begin exercising gradually. Stress fractures are more likely to happen when you first start an exercise program if you try to do too much too quickly.
- Be steady and consistent with your workouts. Avoid sudden changes in intensity or type of exercise.
- Wear supportive footwear. Regularly monitor your footwear for signs of wear and replace when necessary.
- Consult your health care provider if you have a history of flat feet or foot/ankle problems. Orthotic devices may be needed to prevent problems associated with repetitive stress.
- Consider a regular cross-training program that incorporates both impact and non-impact activities.
- Listen to your body. If symptoms do develop, reduce or modify your activity or consult your healthcare provider. This is NOT a "no pain, no gain" situation.

The above is intended as general information only. Be sure to contact your physician for advice

or your own specific medical problems.