

Repetitive impact on feet can increase risk of stress fractures

Stress fractures of the foot are becoming more common in runners, especially first-time marathoners, according to the American College of Foot and Ankle Surgeons.

The growing popularity of marathons among beginning runners has contributed to the increase in repetitive stress injuries, including stress fractures of the foot, seen by foot and ankle surgeons. Often, first-time marathoners enter a race with little or improper long-distance training. The lack of experience coupled with the repetitive impact placed on the feet during the run can produce enough stress to cause hairline breaks in the bones of the foot.

"Runners who increase their mileage too quickly or change to a more intense phase of training may be more susceptible to a stress fracture due to the increased force placed on the bones," says Alan MacGill, DPM, FACFAS, a foot and ankle surgeon from Boynton Beach, Florida. "A general rule of thumb for runners is to increase the mileage by no more than 10% each week. Runners who are training also need to have adequate rest time in between runs to help decrease the risk of injury."

Runners at all levels of experience are also at higher risk for stress fractures if they wear improper shoes while running or training, suffer from flatfoot or other foot deformities, or have osteoporosis.

Signs to be aware of

Signs of a stress fracture can include pain, swelling, redness and possibly bruising of the area.

"Stress fractures can occur anywhere in the foot and can eventually lead to a complete break of the bone if left untreated," Dr. MacGill explained. "Early diagnosis and treatment are important to ensure proper healing."

If a break is suspected, Denver foot and ankle surgeon John McGarry, DPM, FACFAS, advises runners to immediately follow the RICE protocol -Rest, Ice, Compression and Elevation. If pain and swelling last longer than a few days, a visit to a foot and ankle surgeon for an x-ray and diagnosis is in order.

In most cases, treatment includes rest and immobilisation with casting of the foot. Surgery may be required in certain instances to repair and stabilise a stress fracture that has progressed into a full fracture.

Runners can take action to prevent repetitive stress injuries in their feet by wearing supportive athletic shoes and slowly building up their activity levels according to their abilities. "If a runner suffers from abnormal mechanics in the foot, such as overpronation or hypermobility, custom orthotics can also be helpful to prevent these injuries," Dr. McGarry adds.

For additional information on stress fractures and other foot injuries, visit ACFAS' consumer web site, FootHealthFacts.org.

Source: American College of Foot and Ankle Surgeons

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