



Maybe Your Tendinitis Isn't Really Tendinitis: Tendonitis vs. Tendinosis

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When you think about tendinitis, generally you think about a burning pain in a tendon, maybe some localized swelling and the inability to do your regular work or play activities. Current research is having us look at this diagnosis more carefully. It turns out that quite a few injuries that are classified as tendinitis are actually tendinosis. So, what is the difference?

Tendinitis is generally defined as inflammation of the tendon. This is the result of micro-tears in the collagen that make up the tendon. This will usually occur when the musculo-tendinous junction (where muscle and tendon joint each other) become overloaded too heavily, too quickly. This results in injury and an acute inflammatory process with pain and localized swelling/inflammation in the tendon.

Tendinosis is defined as an actual degeneration of the tendon's collagen after being exposed to chronic overuse. This is generally caused by some type of repetitive strain without allowing the tendons time to heal and/or rest from the activity. So basically, this is not an acute onset, but something that develops over time. Examples would be a gradual onset of tennis elbow, or plantar fascia pain. With tendinosis, there isn't any inflammation.

Getting the definition correct is important as both of these conditions require different treatment approaches. The one area of overlap for treatment in these conditions is cross-friction massage...but for two completely different reasons. In tendonitis, the cross friction massage helps to prevent collagen adhesions. In tendinosis, the cross-friction massage actually helps stimulate fibroblast activity and actually form collagen. Other than this overlap, the treatment and speed to recovery for both conditions can be very different.

In tendinitis, you can expect a recovery in days to a few weeks. You would treat it with some initial rest, anti-inflammatories and then a gradual return to activity, initially reducing the load and duration of exercise and then returning to normal activities. Where tendinitis is more of a "traumatic" onset rather than a gradual onset, there generally aren't

many secondary issues associated with this. You get back to your regular activities, building up slowly.

In tendinosis you can expect recovery in a few months. In many cases you will need to learn a new way of doing regular tasks. If you developed chronic tennis elbow (lateral epicondylitis) because of the way you use your mouse, or the way you swing a tennis racquet, you will not only need to recover, but also change the way you approach these activities. Additionally because there isn't actual inflammation in the tissue, the use of anti-inflammatories or cortisone injections are not helpful and according to some studies, can actually prevent healing. The training techniques for strengthening are also different, with an emphasis on eccentric training (lengthening type contractions) to help re-align collagen fibers and help rebuild the strength of the tendon to withstand repetitive activity.

With all these complexities, you can see why it's important to get the right diagnosis before you begin treatment otherwise you could just be treating symptoms and not the actual causes of your condition. If this is something you or someone you know is struggling with, send them to the experts at Blue Hills Sports & Spine Rehabilitation to get the right treatment for their condition.

References:

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