



Ada Bone & Joint Clinic

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Common Sense in Medicine

By

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Shin Splints

I have no idea where the term shin splints came from. I know the shin refers to the boney part of the lower leg known as the tibia. I guess the splints come from the term for the inflammation found in horses legs in the splint bone.

In any case, in humans it refers to a condition involving the lower leg. The patient is usually a runner or dancer or could be a basketball or tennis player. He complains of pain, often severe, over the front inner part of the leg between the ankle and knee. Sometimes there is swelling and tenderness in the area.

While the term is often used for any pain in the "shin", shin splints are usually caused by an inflammation of the lining over the bone called "periostitis". The sore area, usually 3 inches in length is usually on the inner or medial part of the tibia. It is caused by a repetitive stress from running on a hard surface or using poor shoes or having weak or tight muscles. The pain increases with activity. The official name for this condition is now the "MTSS

or medial tibial stress syndrome". While this is a descriptive medical term, it's meaning is about as clear to most people as "shin splints".

Treatment includes stopping or decreasing the activity that caused it, using moist heat and stretching before running and using ice after running. Ibuprofen before activity and better shoes or inserts help. Biking or water exercises help during the healing phase. Three weeks of rest with gradual return to full activity at 6 weeks is common.

The other conditions often confused with shin splints are compartment syndromes and stress fractures which are both much worse. If the pain is toward the outside muscles of the leg and very severe at rest, or across the front of the bone it could be one of these, so have it checked out.

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