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Iliotibial Band Syndrome

What is it?

The Iliotibial (IT) band is a tough band of fibrous tissue that runs down the outside of the thigh. The upper fibers of the IT band start at the hip and the lower fibers insert below the knee on the outside of the tibia (shin bone). It works with the surrounding muscles to assist in flexion and stabilization of the knee. It also assists with hip movements out to the side and internal rotation.

IT band syndrome is an irritation of this tissue due to excessive tightening or shortening of the band. It is commonly felt as localized pain on the lower thigh or outside of the knee where the IT band inserts. It may also be painful at any point along its length. A tight IT band is often the cause of greater trochanteric bursitis (at the prominent knob of the hip bone). Pain can be aggravated by activities such as running, climbing and descending stairs, or getting out of a car. Pain is usually worse during activity and can lessen during rest. This is because activity tends to promote more tightening of the band and more friction over the bony prominences the band crosses.



How did I get it?

There are many anatomical factors that can contribute to the development of this condition. People with bowed legs, excessive internal rotation of the lower leg, pelvic muscle imbalances and leg length differences may be prone to developing this problem. This is a repetitive stress injury so excessive training, or always running on the same side of a curved road is thought to contribute to IT band syndrome.

Biomechanical problems in the feet are also a major contributor to the development of this syndrome. Specifically, excessive pronation or flattening of the arches can lead to extra stresses on the outside of your thigh. When the feet flatten, the lower leg is turned inwards (internal rotation). This moves up the chain to rotate your thigh inwards. This creates a bowing of the knee and added strain on the outside of the knee. When you are running or moving on flattened arches, the tightened IT band may rub over bones in the hip or knee or just get irritated from the tightness, triggering inflammation and pain.

How is it treated?

Exercise: Stretching exercises are directed at lengthening the IT band and the muscles of the outside of your hip, to try and relieve some of the tightness. Strengthening exercises can be directed at your gluteal region to stabilize the pelvis and try to prevent pulling of the IT band at the knee. Remember, the IT band is not a muscle, but a thick band of fibrous tissue (think of a tough piece of leather) so it is very resistant to being stretched.

Rest and/or training modifications may also reduce symptoms, discuss possible training modifications with your physical therapist.

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