

That pain in your leg could lead to more nagging pain in the future

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Winter months offer the opportunity for some athletes to rehab some of those nagging injuries. One injury common among runners and in sports centers is iliotibial band syndrome.

The iliotibial band, or IT, is a long, fibrous band of fascia tissue that runs from the outside of your hip down to the outside of your knee. It has a complex job description: it helps lift your leg to the front and to the side of your body, and it supports your knee during flexion and extension. When this hardworking tissue is injured or overworked, it can be a real pain in the leg.

"Repetitive motion, like running, rowing or cycling, typically is the culprit in IT band issues," says Jacob Erickson, D.O., Sports Medicine physician at Mayo Clinic Health System in Onalaska. "The IT band also is irritated when exercising on uneven surfaces, like trails or hiking downhill."

According to one study, iliotibial band syndrome is one of the most common injuries in runners presenting with lateral knee pain, with an incidence estimated between 5% and 14%

"The first warning sign of injury usually is pain on the outside of your knee, at the hip or down the side of your leg. You may notice the pain right after an exercise class or run. IT band problems can be experienced by active adults, children, and student and adult competitive athletes," explains Dr. Erickson.

Sudden increases in [activity levels](#) also can lead to iliotibial band syndrome. Although repeated tissue compression leading to irritation is best supported by recent evidence, there are several other trains of thought regarding the evolution of this condition.

"Weakness can be diagnosed with a simple test," offers Dr. Erickson. "For example, do a single-leg squat. If your knee tips in as you bend down, rather than pointing forward, be proactive and consider leg-strengthening exercises."

Dr. Erickson says younger athletes involved in sports are typically screened for this in hopes of identifying concerns before they begin. Not catching issues before sports activity, Dr. Erickson says, could result in injury midseason forcing athletes to take time away from their sport.

"The key is to keep a small problem small. Don't ignore the pain and try to push through it," adds Dr. Erickson. "Instead, take a rest from the activity you were doing for a few days. Patients can participate in other [physical activities](#), such as swimming, that do not aggravate their symptoms to maintain their conditioning. If the pain persists, see a sports medicine specialist or athletic trainer, who often will prescribe [physical therapy](#)."

Dr. Erickson says a physical therapist will develop a series of exercises for you that will treat your whole leg, including targeting and strengthening your core and larger gluteal muscles to relieve some of the IT band's workload. The therapist also may do some soft-tissue work or dry needling. Other treatments may include [steroid injections](#) or, in rare cases, surgery.

"In general, the best way to avoid having your IT band become a [pain](#) the leg, is to maintain your core, leg and gluteal muscle strength," Dr. Erickson says.

Provided by Mayo Clinic

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