

Damien Howell Physical Therapy

Hip pain and stretching exercises?

Although the frequency of groin and hip pain in endurance athletes is less frequent than foot and knee pain, it can be a perplexing and frustrating problem. Common diagnoses for pain in the front of the hip in endurance athletes are: strain of the hip flexor muscles, tendonitis, and bursitis. A more serious diagnosis, which has a low probability of occurrence, is a stress fracture of the thigh bone. Another diagnosis, which is very challenging to determine, is a tear of the hip joint capsule.

A common method for treating pain in the front of the hip is to use stretching exercises. It is a mistake to automatically assume that stretching exercise for a problem on the front of the hip is appropriate treatment. There are times when muscles, ligaments and the joint capsule are too long, lax or torn and stretching exercises are not appropriate. Pain alone is not an indication for stretching exercises but pain with short structures is.

Following are two case examples where pain in the front of the hip was initially treated with stretching exercise resulting in prolonged recovery.

Case Example Number 1:

A 32 year old female, who was training for a marathon, developed sharp pain in the front of the hip which often radiated into the thigh. On examination, extension of the unaffected hip was approximately 15 degrees and the affected hip extended 20 degrees. The normal amount of hip extension is 15 degrees. Hip flexion was limited and mildly symptomatic at end of the range of motion on the affected side. The front of the affected hip felt more prominent, puffy and swollen in comparison to the unaffected one. The strength of the hip flexor muscles on the affected hip was weaker than the uninjured one.

Interestingly, just prior to the onset of the hip pain, she had added a yoga class to her training program. Her attempts at self treatment included stretching exercises for the muscles on the front of the hip joint. After several weeks of trying to “stretch it out” she observed that the stretching exercises seemed to aggravate her symptoms. A subsequent MRI test showed a tear of the anterior hip joint capsule.

Case Example Number 2:

A 43 year old female who exercised on a regular basis, experienced a gradual onset of pain on the front of the hip for a year prior to seeking professional assistance. She presented with excessive or lax hip extension, limited and symptomatic hip flexion and weak hip flexor muscles on the affected side. She had tried self-treatment including stretching exercise for the front of the hip. She expressed frustration that the stretching exercises were not helping: in fact, she was suspicious that the exercises were hurting. Again, it is interesting to note she had been participating in yoga classes. A subsequent MRI test showed a possible tear of the anterior hip joint capsule.

If there is a tear in the front of the hip joint capsule, the hip joint is relatively unstable and the ball on the end of the thigh bone can slide forward in the socket of the pelvic bone. Hip extension leads to the ball sliding forward in the hip socket, therefore; hip extension should be minimized or avoided and hip flexion should be encouraged.

Both of these patients' treatment included avoiding exercises or positions which stretched the front of the hip joint. They were instructed to avoid standing with a most of their weight on one leg with the hip joint pushed forward and the hip in extension. They were given instructions to avoid yoga or to modify any yoga positions which stretched the front of the hip. Self mobilization techniques were developed to encourage movement of the hip in the direction opposite of hip flexion. The self mobilization techniques were followed by specific strengthening exercises for the muscles on the front of the hip.

These cases are still open. Both women have improved their symptoms but at the time of their last examinations they had not been able to return to consistent running. The optimal treatment strategy for this kind of problem is yet to be determined, but I am certain that one of the tactics will be to avoid stretching exercises for the front of the hip. Pain in the front of the hip joint is not, by itself, an indication that the front of the hip should be stretched. The correct indication is that the structures on the front of the hip are short.