

Dealing with Groin Pain

By Laura Henn, ATC, PTA, CSCS

Pain in the groin or in front of the hip is most common in athletes playing soccer, football and hockey. It's likely to appear in any sport or activity that requires twisting at the waist, cutting, and quick acceleration and deceleration movements. Many factors can contribute to pain in the hip, groin, or lower abdominal regions.

The pelvis is a key component in athletics since most sports-specific movements depend on it to be well-balanced. This requires input from different muscle groups, ligaments and joints. Muscular imbalances between a weak inner thigh (adductors) and strong outer thigh (abductors), and weak abdominals/core coupled with limited hip joint flexibility increase the likelihood of groin problems.

A standard groin strain is a pulled muscle that usually involves the adductors of the inner thigh or the hip flexors in the front of the hip. It can come on gradually and get worse over time, or it can occur suddenly if the leg gets quickly stretched to the side or back too far. As is typical for a strained muscle, it will be tender to touch in the area of injury, painful to contract or move against resistance and painful to stretch into its normal range of motion.

An athlete may be at greater risk for a groin injury if they have:

- previously injured the area and it wasn't properly rehabilitated
- tight abdominals, hip flexors or hip rotators
- poor core stability
- muscle imbalances - weak inner thigh and stronger outer thigh

To prevent these potentially long-lasting injuries, athletes should ensure they have good hip flexibility and surrounding core and hip strength. If the abdominals become lax and don't function as effectively as they should, the pelvis can assume a forward tilted position with the athlete appearing to stand in a sway backed position. Compensation further occurs with tightness in the hip flexors and low back. Athletes should regularly perform strengthening exercises for their inner thighs, abdominals, outer hip and gluteal muscles.

To improve or maintain hip mobility, a dynamic warm-up before each practice and game can be very effective to ensure the joint is routinely used in all directions of movement. This should address all aspects of the hip including the hip flexors in front, glutes in the back, rotating the hip so the knee is held out (butterfly) and rotating the knee inward (hurdler trail leg).

If an athlete shows significant tightness, difficulty, or has pain with any of these preventive measures, seek the guidance of a certified athletic trainer or orthopedic physical therapist for an individualized assessment and care plan.

Depending on how the injury occurred, it could be more than just a simple pulled muscle. For instance, a very forceful movement at the end ranges of stretch may cause the muscle to pull off a piece of the bone to which it's attached. This injury is called an avulsion. If the athlete experiences significant sharp pain on, or close to a bony region of the hip, the athlete should see a doctor within 24 hours for x-rays and evaluation.

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How to treat a groin injury

- Allow the injured area to rest; avoid painful activity
- Apply ice for 15–20 minutes several times a day
- Take anti-inflammatory or pain relieving medication as directed
- Wear compression shorts for support and comfort

For groin or hip flexor muscle strains

- Use one finger to rub over the sorest spot (friction massage) for 5–7 minutes to facilitate healing nutrients and relieve pain
- Gently stretch the involved muscle to the point where it STARTS to pull and hold that position for 20–30 seconds
- Strengthen the involved muscle group in a pain-free manner to stimulate proper healing and direction placement of muscle fibers

Whenever an injury limits the ability of an athlete to perform because of higher than usual reports of pain, limping and loss of normal joint motion, seek the advice of a qualified health care provider.

Minnesota Sports Medicine (MSM) is a network of sports and orthopedic physicians who treat athletes at medical clinics throughout the Twin Cities metro area. To schedule an appointment please call 612-273-4800. To learn more, visit mnsportsmed.org.

The Institute for Athletic Medicine provides physical therapy, athletic training and chiropractic care. To schedule an appointment at one of our 29 clinics conveniently located throughout the metro, please call 612-672-7100 or visit athleticmedicine.org.

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