

## A World Of Hurt

# Avoiding the ouch

Some problems and injuries just keep dogging runners. **Alison de Souza** finds out what these are and how to avoid them.

## Bunions

These painful swellings on the big toe are often the result of not wearing the right shoes, which may happen when runners choose "fashion rather than function", said orthopaedic sports surgeon Tan Jee Lim.

Flat-footed people are more prone to bunions because when they run, their arches collapse inwards too much and they end up pushing off the big toe. If you have flat feet, look for shoes that can compensate for this.

## Shin splints

The term refers to general pain in the shins or front of the lower legs, which bear more than 80 per cent of your body weight when you run.

Dr Tan explained that shin splints can be caused by either stress fractures or a condition called chronic compartment syndrome, where certain muscles in the lower leg swell excessively or have no room to expand.

Running technique can contribute to shin pain as well. "Some people are what you might call 'lazy runners' — they don't bend their knees enough, so they pump the ankle a lot and shuffle rather than stride, working the shin muscles more than the hip muscles," he said.

Simply correcting the technique can take the stress off the shin muscles. For severe cases, there is surgery.

## Anterior knee pain

This recurrent pain in the front of the knee is another overuse injury runners are prone to, according to **Dr M. Yegappan**, a consultant at Tan Tock Seng Hospital's department of orthopaedic surgery. The pain is often felt when a person climbs stairs or runs downhill.

Women are more prone to it because of their wider hips, said Dr Tan. It is also linked to flat-footedness, which can be corrected with the right shoes, or tightness in the iliotibial band — the thick cord of muscles that runs along the outside of the thigh. This tightness can be alleviated with stretching or physiotherapy.

## Tendinitis

**Dr Yegappan** said overuse can lead to repetitive microtrauma, or little tears, in the tendons. When these tears become inflamed and painfully swollen, you get tendinitis.

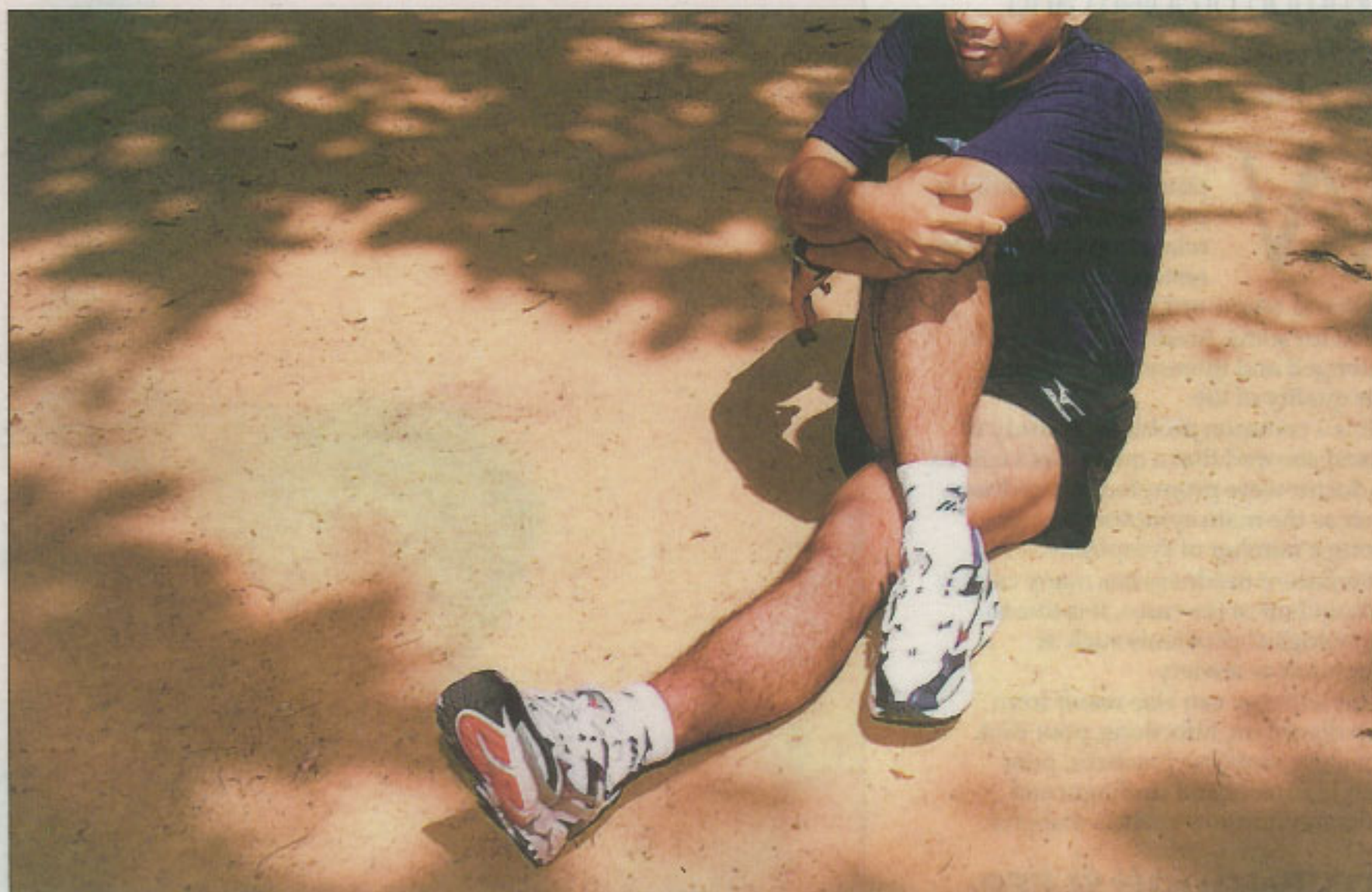
Frequently with runners, it is the Achilles tendon on the back of the heel that suffers. Thankfully, treatment is usually straightforward — you just have to rest the foot and ice it, he said.

If that does not work, anti-inflammatory injections can be administered. However, tendons also grow weaker with age, so sometimes they can snap. If this happens, you may find yourself headed to the operating theatre.

## TIPS ON AVOIDING INJURIES

### The 10 per cent rule

Dr Tan advises runners to start slow and increase the



Some light stretching is recommended before exercise — but do so at only 30 to 50 per cent of your maximum.

distance of their runs by no more than 10 per cent each week. "If you're just starting a running programme, you shouldn't go from zero to running 5km three times a week in the space of a month," he warned, adding that runners should be realistic and plan for the long term.

## Stretching

There has been some debate over whether to stretch before exercise, in view of studies suggesting that doing so may not actually be beneficial, or could even result in slight injury.

Dr Tan, however, advises light stretching before exercise. "But stretch at only 30 to 50 per cent of your maximum. After your workout, when the blood is circulating better and your muscles are more flexible, then you can stretch to your maximum."

## Surfaces

If you can, pick a lower-impact surface to run on, he said. The treadmill provides the best cushioning, followed by the rubberised tracks at stadiums.

Avoid running on the road if you think you might be susceptible to injury.

## Footwear

Avoid shoes that are too tight, said Dr Tan. If possible, find footwear which offers both length and width variations in size, as many running shoes made in the United States do.

Once again, those with flat feet, which he says are very common in Asia, should look for footwear with the right support.

And shoes have a shelf-life, pointed out

**Dr Yegappan**.

"If you don't use them, the support — whether it's

air, cushions or gel — slowly goes," he said.

## Rest and recovery

This is something many runners, whether they are weekend warriors or marathon veterans, do not make time for.

Listening to one's body is crucial — runners often push through the pain or continue exercising once it subsides. With tendonitis, for example, many patients just do not give their tendons time to heal, said **Dr Yegappan**.

## See a doctor before you start

If you are over 40 or have a family history of medical problems, consult one before you begin an exercise programme. It does not have to be someone who specialises in sports medicine either, said Dr Tan. Your family GP can offer basic advice — for example, making sure a diabetic knows to carry sweets with her when she runs.