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GROIN PAIN MIGHT NOT BE WHAT YOU THINK

BY JORDAN D. METZL, MD

Molly, a 33-year-old triathlete, came into my office. “I have been increasing my running mileage, and for the past few weeks I’ve had this aching in my groin,” she said. Groin pain can be quite confusing for athletes, especially since there are several types of injuries that can produce similar symptoms.

The most common type of groin pain is muscular. The adductor muscles originate along the pubic bone and attach on the femur. When these muscles are strained, or torn, they produce the classic groin strain. Clues to groin strain include pain with movement of the leg and pain when the adductor muscles are pushed. Muscular groin pain usually heals within a few weeks, depending on the severity of the muscle injury.

Muscular groin pain can also be caused by a strain of the iliopsoas (hip flexor) tendon. Similar to adductor muscle strain, hip flexor strain hurts when the hip is moved

and is generally treated by physical therapy to strengthen the hip flexor muscles.

Another cause of groin pain that doctors are finding with increasing frequency is the sportsman’s hernia. A hernia, or a tear in the lining of the abdominal cavity, allows the intestines to push outside the abdomen, causing pain.

This type of hernia can cause pain in the groin, and it’s known as a sportsman’s hernia since it occurs most commonly in athletes. This is different than the classic hernia that occurs closer to the hip. Symptoms of a hernia include pain that worsen with coughing or sneezing. Sometimes symptoms that appear to be muscular pain persist for months and turn out to be a sportsman’s hernia. Diagnosis of a sportsman’s hernia is best done by MRI, and the treatment is surgery to close the gap in the abdominal cavity.

Molly’s groin pain was actually coming from her hip. Many patients like Molly are surprised to learn that the most problematic types of hip problems cause groin pain. These include impingement, a pinching of the hip that causes groin pain when the hip is flexed and is often due to a torn labrum, which is the

cartilage lining in the hip joint. Impingement of the hip is also evaluated using MRI and sometimes requires surgery to repair.

Molly’s diagnosis was a hip stress fracture. Among the most serious types of stress fractures is the femoral neck stress

fracture. This injury commonly appears in runners and triathletes who try to “load” running miles too quickly. These athletes almost always complain of groin pain that worsens with running. The keys to recognizing this injury

include groin pain that worsens with the landing phase of running or when hopping on one leg. Often these injuries are diagnosed by MRI, and if not detected early might lead to a hip fracture.

After many months of limited activity as well as calcium and vitamin D supplements to increase her bone strength, Molly successfully returned to running. ▶

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