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The mystery of the side stitch

By Jordan D. Metz, MD

Paul, a 41-year-old triathlete, came into the office complaining of side pain. “Doc,” he said, “I’m fine when I hang around. I don’t ever have pain when I’m biking or swimming. But when I run, I get this side stitch that is killing me. Every time I try to push it, my side won’t let me accelerate.”

As I explained to Paul, side stitches are a very common problem in triathletes, and can occur for a number of different reasons. The most common cause,

especially in the early season, and with athletes who are pushing the run beyond their current capability, is a diaphragm spasm. The diaphragm is the muscle that separates the lungs and chest cavity from the abdominal cavity, and with every breath it expands and contracts. When it works too hard, it can spasm, causing a pain that is felt as a deep side stitch.

Another common scenario is when the diaphragm is working fine, but the breathing effort is excessive, due to panting and puffing, and the accessory muscles of breathing, the obliques, begin to spasm.

Other causes that are less common include exercise induced bronchospasm (EIB) and an anatomical problem with the lungs.

One cause of side stitches that is specific to triathlon is the stress of transitioning from cycling to running. If the core muscles aren’t stretched after a long bike leg, they may spasm, a problem that can be fixed or prevented with a quick stretch in the second transition.

Since the most common causes of side stitches are muscle-related, increasing core strength through exercises such as planks and crunches, especially with rotation, often fixes the problem. If that doesn’t work as a first step, go see your doctor and try an inhaler, which is used to treat side stitches caused by EIB.

At my suggestion, Paul started a serious regimen of core strengthening and was stitch-free in a month. ▲