

Weekend Doctor

By DR. THOMAS F. VAIL

Football is fun to watch, but it's hard to deny that the sport exposes the body to a variety of foot injuries. A foot injury that is common in football players is turf toe.

In fact, Minnesota Vikings safety Harrison Smith limped off the field during the Carolina Panthers games with a left foot injury. He missed the New York Giants game following the injury and is still on the injured reserved list.

His foot is healing well, and he is still optimistic he can return this season without needing surgery.

The name sounds funny, but turf toe is no laughing matter to the player who suffers from it.

Turf toe is a sprain to the ligaments of the big toe joint. Acting as a pulley for tendons, the sesamoids, two pea-shaped bones located in the ball of the foot, beneath the big-toe joint, help the big toe move normally and provide leverage when the big toe "pushes off" during walking and running.

The sesamoids also serve as a weight-bearing surface for the first metatarsal bone, which is the long bone connected to the big toe, absorbing the weight placed on the ball of the foot when walking, running and jumping.

Turf toe occurs when the big toe is forcibly bent up into hyperextension, such as when pushing off into a sprint while having the toe stuck flat on the ground.

This injury is common in football players because artificial turf is harder than natural grass and has less shock absorption.

Turf toe can happen to football players of any level, but also to any sport enthusiast who has increased pressure on the ball of the foot from activities such as running, basketball, football, golf, tennis and ballet.

In addition, people with high arches are at risk for developing this problem as well. Frequent wearing of high-heeled shoes can also be a contributing factor.

The most common symptoms of turf toe are pain, swelling and limited movement at the big-toe joint. Symptoms develop slowly and can get worse if there is repeated injury. A forceful injury to the big toe can cause immediate pain that gets worse over 24 hours. Some patients may even feel a pop at the time of injury.

Like ankle sprains, rest, ice, compression and elevation can be used to treat turf toe.

If your pain does not resolve or gets worse in the following weeks, you should seek treatment with your podiatrist. If not treated correctly, turf toe can lead to a decrease in the range of motion of the big toe joint and even a complete loss of range of motion.

If you find it difficult to walk on the foot, an x-ray of your foot should be done to rule out a possible fracture. Most turf toe injuries are treated without surgery.

Most turf toe injuries heal within two to three weeks. Physical therapy may be needed for strengthening and range of motion improvement.

Remember to give your toe time to heal. Many of the athletes I treat return to the field too soon, leading to further damage and possibly arthritic changes down the road.



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