Dear Alice,

I am a woman who has a family, full-time job, and a very busy life, generally.

Three years ago, I joined a local health club because I was not getting enough exercise. Since then, I have tried to work out three times a week. Every time I exercise on the treadmill, even though I am not running but only walking fast, I experience leg pain in the back of my calves. I have tried stretching to warm up but nothing seems to help. Do you have any suggestions? The pain in my calves is preventing me from increasing my speed and improving my conditioning. I would appreciate any suggestions you might have.

Thanks.

Answer

Dear reader,

First of all, good job on working to fit exercise into your busy life. It's understandable that the calf pain you are experiencing is making it hard to step up your game with a faster pace.

It's possible that you are walking on your heels or toes and putting extra stress on your calves. There are other exercises you could consider besides walking on the treadmill that may be less stressful, and painful, for your calves. Most fitness centers have a variety of cardio machines including bikes, ellipticals, rowers, and stairclimbers. Have you considered using any of these machines for your cardio routine? You may find your fitness level increases if you cross-train; some exercisers even report that this helps with the boredom that can happen from doing the same thing day after day.

Another important consideration is what you are wearing on your feet. This is important not only for your feet, but for the health of your back, legs, and hips. It is a good idea to spend some time finding the best fitting shoe for your needs since improperly fitted and worn-out footwear can actually contribute to injury. It is also important to wear footwear specifically designed for walking, because walking shoes are constructed to support you in all the right places. The shape of the shoe needs to correspond with the shape of your foot, without pressure or pain, or a feeling of binding. When purchasing shoes, take into consideration your prior experience with athletic shoes, your foot type (i.e., normal, rigid, or flat), and the surface on which you will exercise. It's a good idea to solicit advice from the staff at a specialty store about what shoe is the best fit for you and then try on several pair. Some specialty stores will
even let you try the shoe for a week or two and allow an exchange if the shoe isn't right for you. In general, walking shoes should last about 350 to 500 miles tops.

If you are working out at a fitness facility with certified personal trainers, it might make sense to ask one of them to observe your gait. S/he could also give you some tips on proper stretching techniques to use before and after your workout. You are paying to use the facility, so go ahead and ask for questions and advice. See the related Q&A's for tips on working with a trainer, as well as some ideas for stretching and varying your routine.

If these suggestions do not help you, it may be advisable to see an orthopedist, podiatrist, or physical therapist to get to the cause of your problem before it leads to injury. You can ask your health care provider for a referral.

Hope this ideas help you keep moving!

Alice!
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