



Walking into a first shockwave therapy appointment without much context can make even a straightforward session feel uncertain. Most people know they are going in for pain relief, tissue healing, or help with a stubborn overuse injury, but they are not always sure what they should do the day before, what to wear, whether they can work out afterward, or how sore they might feel. Those details matter. Good preparation does not make the treatment work by magic, but it does make the visit smoother, more comfortable, and more useful for both patient and clinician.

Shockwave Therapy is often used for musculoskeletal problems that have not settled with time, rest, exercise, or standard physical therapy alone. Common examples include plantar fasciitis, Achilles tendinopathy, tennis elbow, patellar tendinopathy, calcific shoulder tendinopathy, and irritation around the hip or hamstring origin. By the time someone is referred for it, the issue is usually not brand new. It is often the injury that keeps flaring when they return to running, lifting, or even standing through a work shift.

That history shapes how you should prepare. A shockwave appointment is not quite like a massage, not quite like an injection visit, and not quite like a normal therapy follow-up. It sits in its own lane. The treatment itself is usually brief, but the value of the session depends on good assessment, clear communication, and smart follow-through afterward.

What shockwave therapy is actually trying to do

It helps to understand the basic aim before you show up. Shockwave therapy uses acoustic energy directed into a painful area to stimulate a healing response, reduce pain sensitivity, and support tissue remodeling. The exact mechanism is more nuanced than a simple “break up scar tissue” explanation, which people often hear in casual conversation. In practice, clinicians use it to influence chronic tendon and soft tissue problems that have become stalled.

That is why preparation is not just about logistics. Your provider needs a useful picture of your symptoms. If you can describe where it hurts, how long it has hurt, what makes it worse, what treatments you have already tried, and what your activity level looks like, the session becomes more targeted. A patient who says, “My heel hurts,”

gives one layer of information. A patient who says, “The pain is sharp for the first ten steps in the morning, then dulls, but returns after a long shift on concrete floors, and it flared badly after I increased my weekly mileage from 10 to 18 miles,” gives a clinician something actionable.

That kind of detail matters because shockwave is rarely prescribed in isolation. It is usually part of a broader plan that may include load management, strengthening, mobility work, footwear changes, or temporary training adjustments.

Start with the right questions before the appointment

Before your first session, it is worth clarifying what type of visit you have booked. Some clinics schedule a full evaluation plus treatment on the same day. Others use the first visit mainly for assessment and consent, then start treatment afterward. That distinction sounds minor, but it affects timing, clothing, and expectations.

Ask whether imaging is needed or simply helpful. Many providers can diagnose tendon-related pain clinically, but prior ultrasound, X-ray, or MRI reports can still be useful, especially if symptoms have been lingering for months or there has been a partial tear, calcification, or an earlier injection. If you already have reports, bring them or upload them ahead of time. Do not assume the clinic automatically has access.

It is also sensible to ask about medications. This is especially relevant if you regularly use anti-inflammatory drugs. Some clinicians prefer patients to avoid NSAIDs around the time of treatment because the therapy is meant to encourage a local healing response. Practices differ, and this is not something to guess at on your own. Ask your provider for instructions based on your health history and the area being treated.

Know whether you are a good candidate

Not every painful tendon or heel needs shockwave. It tends to be considered when symptoms are persistent, function is limited, and more conservative options have not fully solved the problem. In clinic, the patients who benefit most are often the ones with a clear diagnosis, a fairly local area of pain, and realistic expectations. The person expecting complete relief after one session is usually disappointed. The person who understands that treatment commonly happens over several visits and improves the odds when paired with a sound rehab plan tends to do better.

There are also situations where treatment may be postponed or avoided. Pregnancy, certain bleeding disorders, active infection, cancer in the treatment area, or treatment over specific sensitive structures may change the plan. A pacemaker or metal hardware does not automatically rule treatment in or out in every case, but it does make it essential to disclose your full history. If you have ever had a deep vein thrombosis, recent surgery, a tendon rupture, or a corticosteroid injection near the painful area, say so early.

Patients sometimes hold back details because they think the referral already “covers it.” It rarely does. Referrals are often brief. The safest assumption is that your clinician needs the full story from you.

A few days before the appointment

The best preparation begins before the day itself. You do not need a dramatic routine, but you do want your baseline symptoms to be clear. If possible, do not start three new treatments at once. For example, if you begin shockwave, change shoes, start a heavy calf strengthening program, and book deep tissue work all in the same week, it becomes hard to tell what is helping and what is aggravating the area.

One practical trick is to keep a short symptom note for two or three days before the visit. Write down when pain is worst, how long it lasts, and what activities trigger it. This does not need to become a diary. A few lines are enough. Patterns that feel obvious in the moment often vanish when you are sitting in the treatment room trying to remember whether stairs or hills are the bigger problem.

If you are an athlete, record your recent training load honestly. Mileage, speed work, hill sessions, court time, heavy lifts, or sudden changes in frequency all matter. People often underreport because they do not want to be told to scale back. In reality, accurate information usually leads to more precise guidance, not blanket restrictions.

What to bring

Bring any relevant records, but bring context too. Old imaging reports, a summary of previous treatments, a current medication list, and your regular shoes can all be helpful. Footwear is especially relevant for foot and Achilles issues. A worn-out running shoe with a collapsed heel counter tells its own story.

If your pain only appears during or after a certain activity, bring details from that activity. A golfer with elbow pain should be able to say how often they play and whether the pain starts on the range or late in a round. A warehouse worker with plantar heel pain should mention floor type, shift length, and whether they climb ladders. The more specific the load pattern, the more tailored the advice.

Dress for access, not style

This sounds basic, but it is one of the most common avoidable frustrations. Wear clothing that allows easy access to the treatment area. If your appointment is for the Achilles, plantar fascia, knee, or hamstring, shorts or loose joggers are ideal. If it is for the shoulder, upper arm, or lateral elbow, a sleeveless or loose short-sleeve top works much better than a tight long-sleeve layer.

Shockwave treatment uses gel and a handpiece applied directly to the skin. The session is more efficient when the clinician is not working around belts, compressive shapewear, stiff denim, or complicated layers. If you are coming from work, bring a change of clothes. Many people regret not doing this when they realize they booked an afternoon appointment in office wear.

Eat, hydrate, and manage the basics

You usually do not need to fast, and in most cases you should not arrive hungry. A normal meal and ordinary hydration are enough. The treatment itself is brief, but if you have a tendency to feel lightheaded with painful procedures, low blood sugar and dehydration make that more likely.

Caffeine is a judgment call. A normal amount is generally fine. If you already feel anxious about pain, doubling your coffee intake beforehand is not likely to help. The same goes for arriving after a hard workout with no food or water on board. Clinicians see this more often than you might think, especially with runners squeezing appointments into busy days.

Pain during treatment, what to expect realistically

One of the most useful things a provider can tell you is that shockwave is often tolerable, but not always comfortable. Patients vary widely. Some describe it as intense tapping or snapping over a tender point. Others say it feels sharp only when the clinician reaches the most irritated spot. The painful part is usually brief, and most clinicians can adjust energy settings based on tissue, diagnosis, and tolerance.

This is where communication matters. There is a persistent myth that more pain during treatment means better results. That is not a reliable rule. Treatment should be purposeful, not punitive. If the discomfort becomes excessive, say so. [Shockwave Therapy](#) Experienced clinicians can often modify pressure, positioning, or treatment parameters without turning the session into a contest of endurance.

For some conditions, a provider may also combine shockwave with a manual exam and an exercise discussion in the same appointment. That means the visit can feel more like a working clinical session than a passive procedure. Come prepared to answer questions and move a little if asked.

A simple pre-appointment checklist

Use this the evening before or the morning of your appointment:

1. Confirm the clinic location, appointment length, and whether evaluation and treatment happen the same day.
2. Gather imaging reports, medication information, and a short summary of symptoms and prior treatments.
3. Wear or pack clothing that exposes the treatment area easily.
4. Eat normally, hydrate, and avoid arriving immediately after a demanding workout unless your provider advised otherwise.
5. Write down any questions about pain, activity restrictions, expected soreness, and how shockwave fits into your broader rehab plan.

Medications and treatments to mention upfront

This is where candid reporting helps. Tell your provider if you recently had a corticosteroid injection near the area. That detail can affect timing and caution, especially around tendons. Mention blood thinners, diabetes, neuropathy, autoimmune disease, or a history of poor wound healing. Even if the treatment area is small, those factors can change how symptoms are interpreted and how aftercare is managed.

It is also worth mentioning any recent hands-on treatment that left you unusually sore. If you had aggressive scraping, dry needling, or a very forceful massage the day before, the tissue may already be irritated. That does not always cancel a session, but it gives needed context if the area is more reactive than expected.

The same principle applies to pain medications. If you routinely take something before activity, say so. If you are considering taking medication preemptively because you are worried about discomfort during the appointment, ask first rather than guessing.

What happens once you arrive

Most appointments start with a discussion and focused examination. Even if you have a diagnosis, the provider should still confirm that the painful area and symptom behavior fit the proposed treatment. A well-run exam often includes palpation, movement testing, strength testing, and a few provocative tasks. For plantar fasciitis, for example, the provider may look at first-step pain, calf tightness, foot posture, and load tolerance. For Achilles tendinopathy, they may check whether symptoms are insertional or mid-portion, because management details differ.

Then comes the treatment itself. Gel is applied, the handpiece is placed over the target area, and a set number of pulses or a planned dose is delivered. Depending on the machine and clinical approach, settings may be adjusted

through the session. Some clinics move quickly. Others build up intensity gradually. Neither style is inherently better. What matters is that the treatment fits the tissue, the diagnosis, and your tolerance.

The session may only take several minutes, but do not mistake short duration for triviality. Tendons and fascia can react strongly to a well-targeted stimulus. It is common to leave thinking, "That was fast," then notice later that the area feels worked on.

After the session, what soreness is normal

Mild to moderate soreness for a day or two is common. Some people feel immediate lightness or reduced pain, but that is not universal and should not be the only measure of success. Others feel slightly more irritated for 24 to 48 hours, especially if the area was very sensitive to begin with. Heel pain and Achilles complaints can be like this.

What matters more is the pattern over time. Improvement often shows up in practical ways: less pain on first standing, better tolerance for walking, less next-day irritability after exercise, or the ability to resume a loading program with fewer setbacks. Those functional markers tell you more than a single post-treatment pain score.

Avoid the temptation to "test" the area aggressively on the same day. Patients do this all the time. A runner gets treatment for Achilles pain, feels decent afterward, then does hill repeats that evening to see whether it worked. That usually creates noise rather than useful information.

Activity after shockwave therapy

Most providers recommend a short period of relative moderation rather than complete inactivity. That distinction is important. Relative moderation means you avoid high-impact, high-load, or provocative activity for a short window if advised, but you may still walk, move, and perform selected rehab work depending on the condition.

A classic example is chronic plantar heel pain. A patient may be told to skip the sprint workout or long hike for a day or two, but continue ordinary daily movement and prescribed calf or foot exercises on a modified schedule. For lateral elbow pain, the advice may focus on avoiding a heavy grip session or a long racquet practice immediately afterward while continuing ordinary use of the arm.

The exact timeline varies by diagnosis, irritability, and what else is being done in your plan. Ask for specifics. "Can I exercise?" is too broad to be useful. Better questions are, "Can I run tomorrow if pain stays under a certain level?" or "Can I keep doing eccentric calf raises this week?"

Questions worth asking before you leave

Good appointments end with a clear next step. You should know whether you are expected to feel sore, what kind of activity is okay, when the next session should happen, and what signs suggest the treatment is helping. You should also know what to do if pain flares.

If your provider gives you a home exercise plan, ask how it fits with the shockwave schedule. In many chronic tendon cases, exercise progression remains central. Shockwave may support recovery, but it is not a substitute for restoring capacity. Patients do best when they understand that relationship early rather than assuming the machine alone will carry the outcome.

When to call the clinic

Most post-treatment soreness is routine, but a few situations deserve a call:

1. Pain is escalating sharply rather than settling over the first couple of days.
2. You notice marked swelling, unusual bruising, or a new loss of function.
3. Numbness, significant weakness, or new neurologic symptoms appear.
4. You are unsure whether to continue a rehab exercise or sport session that was already scheduled.
5. You had a reaction that felt out of proportion to what the clinician described as typical.

The mindset that helps most

The patients who navigate Shockwave Therapy best usually treat it as one part of a thoughtful recovery process. They arrive with a clear symptom history, they wear practical clothing, they ask sensible questions, and they understand that short-term soreness does not automatically mean something went wrong. They also resist two common extremes. One is expecting instant resolution after a single appointment. The other is assuming nothing is happening unless the treatment feels intense.

A more useful mindset is steady and observant. Notice whether your first steps in the morning improve, whether a workday becomes easier, whether your tendon calms down faster after loading, whether your week-to-week tolerance increases. Those are the kinds of changes clinicians look for.

Shockwave therapy tends to work best when expectations are calibrated and the surrounding plan is solid. If you prepare well, your provider can spend less time pulling basic details out of you and more time making good clinical decisions. That alone can change the quality of the session. And if you are dealing with a stubborn injury that has already consumed months of trial and error, that kind of clarity is worth a great deal.

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FAQ About Shockwave Therapy

What does shockwave therapy actually do?

Shockwave therapy delivers high-energy acoustic sound waves through the skin to an injured area. This process "wakes up" stubborn, chronic soft-tissue injuries by increasing local blood flow, breaking down calcifications, and triggering the body's natural cellular repair and tissue regeneration mechanisms.

What are the drawbacks of shockwave therapy?

Shockwave therapy can cause temporary pain, skin redness, bruising, swelling, or numbness at the treatment site. It may require multiple sessions, can be costly out-of-pocket because insurance often does not cover it, and is unsafe for pregnant individuals or those with blood-clotting disorders.

Does shock wave therapy really work?

Yes, shock wave therapy (extracorporeal shockwave therapy, or ESWT) works well for specific chronic soft-tissue and bone conditions, showing success rates around 60% to 80% for stubborn issues like plantar fasciitis and tennis elbow when other conservative treatments fail.