

Ask your Physical Therapist: Ankle Sprains

Q: What is an ankle sprain?

A: An ankle sprain is defined as a twisting injury to the ankle. It occurs when the ankle is turned unexpectedly in any direction that is further than the ligaments are able to withstand. The ankle can twist inward (most common), outward, rotate, or a combination. The twisting of the ankle stretches or tears the ligaments that holds the ankle and foot bones together, and can lead to instability and re-injury. The ankle sprain is the most common orthopedic injury. Typical signs and symptoms include an ankle that is painful, swollen, and often bruised.

Q: What causes an ankle sprain?

A: Most ankle sprains occur during sports/recreational activities. Especially those involving jumping, running, or sharp turning (i.e. basketball, volleyball, skiing). Landing awkwardly after jumping or landing on another person's foot are two common causes. But ankle injuries can also occur when walking on uneven or slippery surfaces like stepping into a pothole stepping off a curb.

Q: What should I do if I sprain my ankle?

A: To speed recovery and minimize pain and injury, follow the **PRICE** rules:

P: PROTECT the injured ankle: The ankle may be splinted, taped or braced to help prevent further injury

R: REST: Avoid (as much as possible) all activities that cause pain to the ankle.

I: ICE: Also called cryotherapy. Ice the ankle for 15-20 minutes (not longer) 3-5 times a day for the first 1-3 days after injury. Ice in a plastic bag, a thermal ice wrap or even frozen vegetables can be used. Ice will help decrease pain and reduce the amount of swelling and soft tissue damage that typically occurs after an ankle sprain.

C: COMPRESSION: Apply comfortable compression to the ankle with an elastic bandage from the toes to about mid-calf. The compression will help reduce the amount of swelling in the ankle. Loosen the wrap if the toes start to turn blue or feel cold.

E: ELEVATION: Elevate the ankle above the level of the heart. Gravitational pull will help reduce fluid accumulation in the ankle, enabling faster healing and decreased stiffness.

Once pain is under control and tissue swelling starts to decrease, then gentle range of motion exercises should be initiated.

Q: How do I know how bad my ankle injury is?

A: If the ankle is obviously fractured/dislocated or the injury is causing severe pain/disability, then medical attention should be sought immediately. Ankle sprains are classified by severity:

Grade I: Grade I (first degree) sprain is the most common type of sprain and requires the least amount of treatment and recovery time. The ligaments connecting the ankle bones are overstretched and damages microscopically but not actually torn. The ankle does not lose stability and there is minimal or no loss of functional use of the ankle.

Grade II: Also called 2nd degree, this type of sprain is more severe and indicates the ligament(s) have been more significantly damaged. The ankle does continue to remain stable, as the ligaments are partially torn. Moderate to severe pain may be present initially; swelling and joint stiffness will develop. It may take up to 2-3 months before full strength and stability is restored to the ankle.

Grade III: The Grade III (or third degree ankle sprain) is the most severe. The force of the sprain results in a complete tear of the ligament(s) and the ankle will become unstable. Severe pain is almost always present. Profuse swelling can develop and the tissue often becomes bruised (indicates tearing of tissue). Some form of immobilization (ankle boot or splint) is usually required. There is a complete loss of functional use of the ankle requiring the necessity of crutches for mobility. Full recovery can take up to four months or longer.

Q: Why do I keep spraining my ankle?

A: Often, after an ankle sprain, the ligaments will remain lax (loose). As a result, instability and weakness can develop in the ankle. Stretching (in the correct direction) and strengthening the ankle can help restore stability to the ankle.

Q: Are there exercises I can do to help prevent future ankle sprains?

A: Yes. In fact, the correct stretching and strengthening exercises will usually result in improved motion, increased strength, less pain, and functional stability of the ankle. As a result, functional use of the ankle is restored and individuals are able to return to their favorite sports and recreational activities.