Hamstring Injury

Understanding muscle strains, symptoms and recovery

Hamstring Injury

A guide to causes, treatment and recovery



What is a hamstring injury?

The hamstrings are three muscles at the back of your thigh that bend the knee and move the hip. A strain happens when muscle fibres are overstretched or torn, often during sprinting or sudden movements.

Common causes

Sprinting or sudden acceleration; overstretching; poor warm-up; muscle weakness, fatigue or reduced flexibility; and returning to sport too quickly.

Symptoms, severity and diagnosis

Recognising an injury and knowing when to seek help

Common symptoms

Sudden sharp pain at the back of the thigh; tightness or pulling; swelling or bruising; pain when walking, bending the knee or running; and reduced strength or flexibility.

Severity of hamstring injuries

Grade 1 (mild): overstretching with mild pain and stiffness.
Grade 2 (moderate): partial tear with pain, swelling and weakness.
Grade 3 (severe): complete tear with marked pain, bruising and loss of function (rare).

How is it diagnosed?

A GP or physiotherapist usually assesses symptoms, injury history and movement. Ultrasound or MRI may be considered for severe injuries or ongoing symptoms.

Early management: first 48–72 hours

Reduce painful activity, use wrapped ice for 10–15 minutes as needed, and keep moving gently within comfort. Avoid aggressive stretching or massage early on.

When to seek medical advice

Seek assessment if pain is severe or worsening, walking is difficult, bruising or swelling is significant, or symptoms are not improving after 2–3 weeks.

Exercises and rehabilitation

Progressive strengthening and flexibility with clinical guidance

Hamstring exercise examples

Examples from the original leaflet are shown below. Your physiotherapist can select suitable exercises and advise when to progress.



Exercise safely

Start with comfortable movement and build strength gradually. Avoid forcing stretches or returning to sprinting while pain or weakness persists. Ask your physiotherapist which exercises are appropriate.

Treatment, recovery and prevention

Practical steps for a safe return to activity

Pain relief and early care

Simple pain relief such as paracetamol may help. Ask a clinician or pharmacist whether anti-inflammatory medication is suitable.

Physiotherapy and rehabilitation

Progressively strengthen the hamstrings and surrounding muscles, improve movement control and flexibility, and gradually return to walking, running and sport.

Return to activity

Increase speed and training intensity gradually. Aim for full strength and pain-free movement before returning to sport.

Typical recovery times

Mild strain: approximately 1–3 weeks. Moderate strain: 4–8 weeks. Severe tear: several months. Recovery varies between people.

Preventing further injury

Warm up before exercise, build strength and flexibility, avoid sudden increases in training load and maintain hip and core strength.

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