Ankle Sprain and Strain

Understanding symptoms, treatment and recovery

Ankle Sprain and Strain

A guide to symptoms, treatment and recovery



What is an ankle sprain or strain?

A sprain stretches or tears the ligaments that support the ankle joint. A strain affects the muscles or tendons around the ankle.

Supporting your recovery

Most ankle sprains and strains recover well with early movement, appropriate exercises and a gradual return to activity.

Understanding your ankle injury

Causes, symptoms and diagnosis

What is an ankle sprain or strain?

A sprain stretches or tears the ligaments (strong bands supporting the joint). A strain affects the muscles or tendons around the ankle. These common injuries often follow a twist, fall or sudden change in direction.

Common causes

- Twisting the ankle when walking or running
- Sports such as football, basketball or running
- Uneven ground or stairs
- Unsupportive footwear

Symptoms

- Pain, swelling, tenderness and bruising
- Stiffness or reduced movement
- Difficulty putting weight through the foot
- A feeling that the ankle may “give way” Symptoms range from mild to severe depending on the injury.

How is it diagnosed?

A healthcare professional considers your symptoms, how the injury happened and a physical examination. An X-ray may be arranged if a fracture is suspected.

Recovery reminder

Most ankle sprains and strains recover well with early movement, appropriate exercises and a gradual return to activity. A physiotherapist can guide your recovery.

Important information

Seek medical advice if you cannot put weight on the ankle, have significant bruising or deformity, or your pain or swelling is worsening.

Exercises and rehabilitation

Gentle movement, strength and balance

Ankle exercise examples

Start with gentle movements as pain allows. Progress to strength and balance work as symptoms improve. A physiotherapist can guide your programme.



Recovery and progression

Early movement helps recovery and prevents stiffness. Progress to strengthening, balance and control exercises, then walking and sport as symptoms improve. A physiotherapist can guide a personalised programme.

Recovery: mild injury 1-3 weeks; moderate 4-6 weeks; severe 8-12 weeks or longer. Timing varies with severity and adherence to exercise.

Returning to activity

You should walk without pain or limping, move the ankle fully, and balance and hop without pain. Returning too early increases re-injury risk.

Management and next steps

Early care, prevention and when to seek help

Early management: first 48-72 hours

Protect: avoid activities that increase pain; supportive footwear or a brace if advised.
Rest: reduce activity, but move gently as pain allows.
Ice: 15-20 minutes, 2-3 times daily; wrap in a cloth to protect the skin.
Compression: use a bandage to control swelling, not too tight.
Elevation: raise above hip level when resting. Paracetamol or anti-inflammatory medication may help if suitable for you.

When to seek medical advice

- Pain or swelling worsens after a few days
- You cannot put weight on the ankle
- Significant bruising or deformity
- No improvement after 2-3 weeks, or repeated ankle sprains

Preventing future injuries

Warm up before exercise, maintain ankle strength and balance, wear supportive footwear and consider ankle supports during sport if advised.

Key message

Most sprains and strains recover well with early movement, appropriate exercises and a gradual return to activity. Stay active within comfort. Speak to your GP, physiotherapist or healthcare provider if concerned.

Questions or concerns?

Speak to your GP, physiotherapist or healthcare provider if symptoms are not improving or you experience repeated ankle sprains.

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