

Center for Athletic Medicine

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Ankle Sprains

What is an ankle sprain?

Ankle sprain is the most common sports injury. It occurs when there is a stretch or tear of one or more ligaments in the ankle joint. Ligaments are the strong bands of tissue that connect bones at the joint. Most ankle sprains occur on the outside part of the ankle, but they can occur on the inside as well. Sprains are graded according to severity.

Grade I sprain:

Pain with minimal damage to the ligaments.

This is the most common type of sprain.

Grade II sprain:

Ankle ligaments are partially torn and the ankle usually swells immediately.

The doctor may be able to detect some looseness of the joint.

Grade III sprain:

Complete tearing of the ligament.

The joint is very loose or unstable.

How does an ankle sprain occur?

Ankle sprain is caused by twisting your ankle. Your foot usually turns in or under, but may turn to the outside.

What are risk factors for ankle sprains?

- Previous ankle sprain
- Weak or imbalanced muscles
- Wearing inappropriate or worn-out shoes
- Exercising on an uneven surface
- Being overweight

What are the symptoms of an ankle sprain?

- Pain
- Swelling
- Discoloration or bruising
- Instability
- Limited ankle motion

How is an ankle sprain treated?

- Apply ice packs to the ankle for 20-30 minutes every 3-4 hours for the first several days.
- After that, ice the ankle at least once per day until swelling has resolved.
- Elevate your ankle by placing a pillow underneath your foot.
- Wrap an elastic bandage (ACE wrap) around your ankle to keep the swelling from getting worse.
- Use crutches until you can walk without pain.
- Your doctor may prescribe an a lace-up brace or ankle stirrup.
- Take an anti-inflammatory medication (Ibuprofen) medication.
- Perform ankle exercises to improve range of motion, flexibility, strength, and balance. The exercises will help you return to your normal activity or sports. This can be accomplished with a course of physical therapy.
- Rarely, severe ankle sprains with complete tearing of the ligaments require surgery.

When can I return to my sport or activity?

The length of recovery depends on many factors:

- Age
- Health
- Severity of injury
- Previous injuries to that joint

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Everyone recovers from injury at a different rate. Return to your sport or activity will be determined by how soon your ankle recovers, not by how many days or weeks it has been since your injury occurred. In general, the longer you have symptoms before you start treatment, the longer it will take to get better.

The goal of rehabilitation is to return you to your sport or activity as soon as is safely possible. If you return too soon, you may worsen your injury, which could lead recurrent instability or chronic pain.

You may safely return to your sport or activity when:

- You have full range of motion of the injured ankle.
- You have full strength of the injured ankle
- You can jog straight ahead without pain or limping.
- You can sprint without pain or limping.
- You can run in a figure of eight, without pain or limping.
- You can balance on the injured leg
- You can jump on the injured leg alone without pain.

How can I prevent ankle sprains?

- Wear proper, well-fitting shoes when you exercise.
- Stretch gently and adequately before and after athletic or recreational activities.

Consider taping the ankle or wearing a brace for strenuous sports, especially if you have a previous injury.