

Emergency Advice for Sprains

A sprain causes pain, swelling and discolouration of the area. This occurs because the small blood vessels and fibers in the flesh may burst after an injury or blow, causing the blood and fluid to enter the surrounding tissue. It is important that you look after the area carefully in the period after the injury. Often sprains will heal themselves in time if you follow simple guidelines, however it is important to seek medical assistance if you are concerned that you may have done more serious damage to the tissues.

What should I do about a sprain?

REST - If you have a sprain you will also suffer pain. The injured area must be kept still or the bleeding in the tissue will continue more intensely. Rest is important in order to ensure that healing occurs as quickly as possible. This should last at least one or two days as the bleeding can continue for up to 24 hours.

ICE – Since blood enters the tissues when you have a sprain, the main thing is to limit the bleeding. This can be done by cooling. The best things to use on the area are ice cubes in a plastic bags, frozen peas or custom-made cooling packs which can be kept in the freezer. The important thing is to make sure that you put a towel between the swollen area and ice pack to ensure that you don't burn your skin.

Stop the cooling if your skin turns white or hard and contact a doctor if the skin does not regain its usual colour after the process has stopped. It is a good idea to cool the skin for 10 to 15 minutes, stop for 15 minutes, then cool again, and so on.

Be careful if you are diabetic. To prevent damage to your blood circulation, do not cool an area without consulting your doctor.

COMPRESSION - You can also wrap bandages around the damaged area to prevent movement and help stop the inner bleeding. Tubigrip or similar compression bandages are good and should be worn until the swelling has gone down. If you are wearing bandages, it is important to monitor the area surrounding them. If this becomes blue-coloured and the surrounding tissue seems cold, you should remove the bandages and contact a doctor.

ELEVATION - If possible, the sprained area should be kept straight - an arm, for example, can be supported in a sling. Try to keep the injured area in the same position while you are sleeping, perhaps by placing a couple of pillows under your sprain. It is important that the injured area is not pointing downwards, otherwise fluid build-up may occur, for example by elevating a sprained ankle on a stool. Fluid build-up prolongs the healing process and causes more pain.

When to consult a doctor or physiotherapist

- If the sprain is accompanied by severe pain and severe swelling.
- If one of your joints gives way and is unable to carry your weight.
- If the sprain has not improved after four days of self-treatment.

Recovering from sprains

It is important that after one or two days rest to start moving the injured body part to reduce the amount of scarring formed in the damaged tissue. At first do this gently and do not force the movement so that it is painful. When the pain and the swelling have gone, start exercising the injured part of the body gradually until it is back to full function, making sure that you warm up slowly and use stretching exercises to begin with. Bear in mind that it can take up to six weeks for the injured tissue to completely heal. If you are concerned that your sprain is not healing as it should, or if it continues to give you pain or is weak when you return to normal activity, please consult your doctor or physiotherapist.