

Sprains and Strains

SELF-CARE FORUM FACT SHEET NO. 9

This fact sheet helps you know what is normal and what you can expect to happen if you sustain a sprain or strain. It also tells you when you should become concerned and seek advice from a health professional, so that you can work together to find the best way forward.

Useful facts

What is a sprain?

Sprains are due to injured ligaments and often affect the ankle, wrist, thumb and knee. Typical symptoms include pain around a joint, swelling, tenderness, bruising and not being able to use the joint normally or put weight on it. Swelling often occurs almost immediately but the onset of bruising may be delayed.

What is a strain?

Muscle strains are caused by over-stretching or tearing of the muscle and are common in the legs and lower back. Muscle strains usually lead to pain and swelling, bruising, and reduced limb function.

How common are they?

Sprains and strains are common, but often go unreported. Ankle sprain is the most common type of sprain, and often occurs during sports.

What can reduce the of risk sustaining a sprain or strain?

Wearing appropriate footwear, properly warming up before exercising, using good exercise technique and proper use of equipment.

What can I expect to happen?

How long will my symptoms last?

Most sprains and strains get better by themselves and usually get better within four to six weeks with little risk of long-term complications.

When will I be fit again?

Most people will be able to return to full sporting activities at around 12 weeks. However, some severe injuries of larger muscles may take several months to heal.

Will I need any tests?

Most sprains and strains are diagnosed through clinical history-taking and examination. Your doctor may consider further assessments or tests, such as an X-ray or scans, if complications or a fracture (broken bone) are suspected.

Treatment for back pain

Pain relief:

Oral and topical (rub-on) anti-inflammatory painkillers are widely available over-the-counter (OTC). These can be used to relieve pain and reduce swelling. If you need help with these talk to a member of your pharmacy team.

See the section "what can I do to help myself now and in the future" for more information on treating sprains and strains.

What can I do to help myself now and in the future?

As well as pain relief, there are things you can do to help ease symptoms:

PRICE and HARM: Protect the affected limb, Rest it for 48-72 hours, and use Ice as soon as possible after the injury. Using Compression bandages and Elevating (raising) the limb can also reduce swelling.

Avoid Heat, Alcohol, Running (or any other form of exercise) and Massage (HARM) in the first 72 hours after an injury.

Exercises for sprains: As soon as pain allows, gently move the joint in all possible directions to increase and maintain flexibility. [Physiotherapy exercises](#) for ankle sprains can be useful.

Immobilising the sprained joint can delay recovery. An exception is in severe ankle sprains, where immobilisation with a brace or cast for 10 days can support recovery.

Rest for strains: For strains it is best if you keep the affected muscle still for a few days after the injury before starting to move it again. Do gentle stretching and strengthening exercises and wear appropriate footwear at home, work and when you take part in sports.

When to seek help

Seek further medical advice if you've suffered a severe sprain or strain that may suggest a broken bone or joint dislocation, if your pain is not controlled by over-the-counter (OTC) medication, or if your sprain or strain does not get better as expected.

Warning symptoms and signs include:

Severity: Your pain is severe and not controlled by OTC medication;

Duration: Your symptoms don't start to improve after 3 to 4 days of self-treatment;

Walking: You can't walk because of your injury, or an affected leg 'gives way' and makes you walk unsteadily;

Deformity: The affected body part is deformed, or shows lumps or bumps;

Movement: You can't move an affected joint;

Circulation: Your skin over the affected area feels numb or looks pale;

Bruising and swelling: You notice more than only mild bruising and swelling.

Where to find out more

A member of your pharmacy team can help with assessing and managing your symptoms.

Or, visit these reputable websites for more information:

[NHS Inform, Scotland:](#)

[NI Direct, Northern Ireland:](#)

[NHS 111, Wales:](#)

[NHS Website:](#)

[Physio Exercises:](#)