

Sprains and strains

This fact sheet helps you to know what's 'normal' and what you can expect to happen if you suffer a sprain or strain. It also tells you when you should become concerned and seek advice from a health professional.

Useful facts

- **What is a sprain?** *Sprains* are due to injured ligaments and often affect the thumb, wrist, ankle and knee. Typical symptoms of sprain include pain around a joint, swelling, tenderness, and an inability to use the joint normally. Swelling often occurs almost immediately, whereas the onset of bruising may be delayed.
- **What is a strain?** *Muscle strains* are caused by over-stretching or tearing of muscle fibres and are common in the legs and lower back – particularly in people who are unfit or do not use good sporting techniques. Muscle strains usually lead to muscle 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, often occurring during sports and resulting in 1 to 1.5 million Accident & Emergency (A&E) department visits in the UK each year.
- **What increases the risk of suffering a sprain or strain?** You're at higher risk of suffering sprains and strains if you don't warm up properly when taking part in sport, or if you exercise when you're tired.

What can I expect to happen?

- ✓ **How long will my symptoms last?** Most sprains and strains get better by themselves and usually resolve within six to eight weeks, depending on where the injury is and how bad it is. This is opposed to a *fracture* – a broken bone – which usually requires medical investigation and treatment. You'll find out later in this fact sheet which symptoms should prompt you to seek medical advice.
- ✓ **When will I be fit again?** You're likely to be able to return to full sporting activities at around 12 weeks. But some severe injuries of larger muscles may take several months to heal.
- ✓ **Will I need investigations?** For most sprains and strains, you won't normally need any X-rays or scans.

Continued overleaf



SELF CARE FORUM FACT SHEET NO. 9

What can I do myself to get better – now and in the future?

- ✓ **PRICE** Protecting the affected limb, resting it, and using ice, compression bandages and elevation (**PRICE**) are useful for treating injuries initially. Avoid heat, alcohol, running (or any other form of exercise) and massage (**HARM**) in the first 72 hours after an injury.
- ✓ **Exercises for sprains** If you suffered a sprain, gently move your limb in all possible directions (as soon as your pain allows) to increase and maintain flexibility. Avoid immobilising the affected body part – except in severe ankle sprains, where immobilisation can lead to a quicker recovery.
- ✓ **Rest for strains** In strains, however, it's beneficial 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, at work and when you take part in sports.
- ✓ **Pain relief** Painkillers and ointments are widely available over the counter (OTC) and can be used to relieve pain and reduce swelling. If you need help with these talk to your pharmacist.

When should I seek medical 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 medication, or if your sprain or strain does not get better as expected.

Warning symptoms and signs include:

- **Severity** Your pain is severe and doesn't start to improve after 2-3 days of using OTC medication.
- **Duration** You don't get better after four 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.
- **Numbness** Your skin over the affected area feels numb.
- **Bruising and swelling** You notice more than only mild bruising and swelling.

Where can I find out more?

Check out the **NHS Choices** website (<http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/sprains/pages/introduction.aspx>) for more information on how you can treat and prevent sprains and strains. Remember that your pharmacist can also help you with assessing your symptoms.

