

Muscle sprains and strains



What is it and how can I treat it?

A sprain is an injury to a ligament - the strong tissues around joints which attach bones together that give support to joints. Injuries to ligaments are usually caused by them being stretched during a sudden pull and the most common are to ankles. A strain usually means a stretching or tearing of muscle fibres. Most muscle strains occur either because the muscle has been stretched beyond its limits or it has been forced to contract too strongly.

Both can be very painful but most can be treated at home without the need to see a doctor. Occasionally sprains and strains will need physiotherapy and surgery may be needed for severe sprains where the ligament tears badly.

Generally though, most damaged ligaments or muscles heal by themselves over time. But there are a few simple things you can do to ease the pain and keep inflammation and swelling to a minimum.

- Rest the affected joint or muscle for 48–72 hours following injury
- Apply ice as soon as possible and leave it on for 10–30 minutes. Less than 10 minutes has little effect. More than 30 minutes may damage the skin. Make an ice pack by wrapping ice cubes in a plastic bag or towel (do not put ice directly onto to skin) or use a bag of frozen peas as an alternative. Gently press the ice pack onto the injured part.
- Compression with a bandage will limit swelling, and help to rest a joint. Ask your pharmacist for advice on the right one to use
- Keep the injured part raised. This will limit and reduce swelling. For ankle and knee sprains, keep the foot up on a chair and for hand or wrist sprains, use a sling with your hand and wrist higher than your elbow.

You may not need any medication if you are not in pain but if you are then paracetamol or ibuprofen will help.

If symptoms and swelling do not gradually settle then contact your GP surgery for advice.

For more information on muscle strains and sprains visit www.nhs.uk

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