

Treating an Exercise Injury

Even well-prepared athletes sometimes sustain injuries. It is important to treat an exercise injury properly so you can recover with no long-term effects.

Warning Signs

Some injuries are easy to diagnose, like a twisted ankle or those resulting from a collision, but others can develop over time and require the same attention as more severe injuries. Take heed to some of the warning signs:

- **Swelling:** Swelling and inflammation are the body's ways of immobilizing an area to prevent further harm. If you experience any swelling you need to act immediately to reduce the swelling and start healing.
- **Persistent pain:** Pain that does not go away quickly during a workout is another sign of something more severe than simple stiffness or fatigue. If you experience constant pain during and after exercise, you should not exercise again until the pain subsides significantly.
- **Something amiss:** You know your body better than anyone else, and sometimes the most important signal that you have sustained an injury is that something simply does not feel right. If you experience any loss in the range of motion, if you find yourself favoring one leg or arm over the other, or if you sense something that will eventually lead to pain, you should take time off to recover.

Proper Treatment

All injuries need to be treated immediately so you can return to action as soon as possible. Follow these tips to treat an injury:

- **R.I.C.E:** This is an acronym for Rest, Ice, Compression, and Elevation. It is the traditional way to treat an injury and one of the most effective. The number of these steps you should take depends on the severity of the injury. Many times a little rest is all you need for minor aches and pains. However, at the first sign of a more painful injury, you should apply ice to the affected area for approximately ten to 15 minutes. Continue applying ice off and on over the next few days until the swelling and pain subside. You can apply pressure to the injury by using an elastic bandage. This gives support to the injured area and also prevents further swelling. Elevating the injury helps drain away excess fluid and speed the healing process. Depending on the severity, you should at least keep it elevated while you are resting in the evening.
- **Do not stretch:** An athlete's first instinct often is to try to stretch muscle injuries. While stretching before and after a workout is certainly a good practice, stretching an injured muscle can harm you by

tearing new muscle tissue connections made during the healing process. It is best not to stretch the area until you have recovered more fully, and even then, take it slowly.

- **Pain relief:** Not only can common, over-the-counter medications ease the pain of an injury, they can also help reduce swelling. Take such pain relievers as directed to help with moderate pain, but avoid using them before a workout because they can mask injury pain.
- **Professional medical attention:** Of course, some injuries are too serious to treat on your own. Use common sense, and if the pain, swelling and discoloration are serious enough, you should immediately seek medical attention.

Prevention

Many injuries are accidental and cannot be avoided, but you can help prevent stress-related injuries by preparing and training with these common techniques:

- **Warm-up and cool down:** It is important to build up your workout intensity slowly to avoid muscle injuries. Start with a brisk walk or a few minutes jumping rope or riding a bike. If you prefer, you can also slowly increase your pace while running, cycling or swimming. Once you have finished your workout, spend another few minutes at a reduced pace. A proper warm-up and cool down can improve the efficiency of your workouts and speed recovery.
- **Stretch:** Stretching your muscles and joints before exercise is a key to avoiding injury. Stretching improves flexibility and allows your body to go through its full range of motion during the workout. Remember to hold a stretch smoothly instead of bouncing.
- **Time off:** Even the most dedicated athletes need to rest to let their bodies recover. You should never schedule hard workouts two days in a row. Give yourself a day or two to recover from difficult workouts by doing an easier session in between, and remember to pay attention to the signals your body may be giving you about injuries. It may be better for you in the long run to take a day off rather than pushing your body too far.
- **Cross-train:** You can also mitigate the risk of injury by varying your workout. Not only does this decrease the stress on your body by alternating the focus on different groups of muscles each day, it also makes exercise more enjoyable through less repetition. You still get an excellent workout and get to enjoy many different activities. Cross-training is especially helpful if you are a runner because it gives your feet and joints a break from the pounding. Consider playing team sports along with your individual workouts to vary your schedule.

Injuries are a part of an active lifestyle. If you exercise and play sports long enough, eventually you will sustain some type of injury. Through proper treatment and prevention techniques, though, you can minimize the effects of common injuries and stay off the sidelines.

Resources

- American Medical Society for Sports Medicine (AMSSM): www.amssm.org
- American Orthopaedic Society for Sports Medicine (AOSSM): www.sportsmed.org
- National Athletic Trainers Association (NATA): www.nata.org

Here when you need us.

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