

Injury treatment and rehab

If you get injured during sports, these quick treatment tips can reduce your pain and help you heal more quickly.

1. If you Have Pain - Stop Exercise Immediately

The first sign of any sports injury is usually sudden [pain](#). And the first step in treating a sports injury is to prevent further injury or damage. This means stop activity immediately and start treatment. Resting an injured part is essential to healing, so don't exercise through pain: You'll just make the situation worse.

2. Reduce Swelling with Ice and Compression



Photo: Bradley Kanaris / Getty Images

The first thing that happens after an acute injury is swelling around the site of the injury. The first treatment for most acute soft tissue injuries (bruises, strains, sprains, tears) is to prevent, stop and reduce swelling. When soft tissue is damaged, it swells or possibly bleeds internally. This swelling causes pain and loss of motion, which limits use of the muscles.

To reduce swelling, immediately apply ice to the injury, elevate the injured part above your heart and, use a compression wrap to help keep the swelling in check. Compression keeps the blood from pooling in the tissues. Don't wrap the bandages too tightly, but keep it snug.

3. Ice the Right Way

After just about any sudden sports injury, ice is your friend. Ice reduces swelling and pain. Applying ice over a compression wrap can help reduce swelling more than the wrap alone. Ice several times a day for 20 minutes each time. One of the easiest ways to ice an injury is with a bag of crushed ice or a bag of frozen vegetables. Let the area warm completely before applying ice again (to prevent frostbite). Never apply heat to an acute injury. Heat will increase circulation and increase swelling.

4. Medicate When Appropriate

Pain is the primary symptom of the majority of sports injuries. Most soft-tissue injuries are painful because of the swelling and inflammation that occurs after an injury. Pain relief is often the main reason that people turn to over-the-counter (OTC) anti-inflammatory medications that work by reducing addressing the inflammation that occurs as a result of the injury. [Over the counter pain medications](#) are also useful for reducing the pain of muscle strains and muscle pulls.

5. [Start Moving As Soon As You Can](#)

After a day or two of rest and ice most sprains, strains or other injuries will begin to heal. If your pain or swelling doesn't decrease after 48 hours, see your doctor.

Once healing begins, gentle stretching and light massage may reduce [adhesions](#) and scar tissue formation and improve muscle function. Slowly increase range of motion in the injured joint or muscle. But be careful not to force a stretch, or you risk re-injury to the area.

6. [Rebuild Strength and Joint Stability](#)

After an injury, it is essential for joints to return to proper alignment. A good rehab program will include exercises that target joint stability. This is most important following a lower extremity injury.

Finally, after the injury has healed, strengthening exercises can be begun. Start with easy weights and use good form.

7. [Should I Ice or Heat My Injury?](#)

The treatment for acute sports injuries starts by applying ice. But after healing is well underway, heat may be helpful to ease muscle tension in chronic aches and pains.

Do you know when to use ice and when to use heat on a sports injury? Most athletes know to apply [ice to an acute injury](#), like a [sprained ankle](#), but aren't so sure when to use heat. The following guidelines will help you sort it out.

Acute and Chronic Pain

There are two basic types of athletic injuries: acute and chronic.

- [Acute Pain](#) is of rapid onset and short-lived, or
- [Chronic Pain](#) develops slowly and is persistent and long-lasting.

Acute and Chronic Injuries

Acute injuries are sudden, sharp, traumatic injuries that occur immediately (or within hours) and cause pain (possibly severe pain). Most often acute injuries result from some sort of impact or trauma such as a fall, sprain, or collision and it's pretty obvious what caused the injury.

Acute injuries also cause common signs and symptoms of injury such as pain, tenderness, redness, skin that is warm to the touch, swelling and inflammation. If you have swelling, you have an acute injury.

[Chronic injuries](#), on the other hand, can be subtle and slow to develop. They sometimes come and go, and may cause dull pain or soreness. They are often the result of overuse, but sometimes develop when an acute injury is not properly treated and doesn't heal.

[Cold Therapy with Ice](#)

Cold therapy with ice is the best immediate treatment for acute injuries because it reduces swelling and pain. Ice is a vaso-constrictor (it causes the blood vessels to narrow) and it limits internal bleeding at the injury site. There is controversy as to whether continued application of ice results in a sudden vasodilation of the blood vessels (the hunting response) and if so, at what time this response begins and how often a cycle of constriction and dilation occurs.

To ice an injury, wrap ice in a thin towel and place it on the affected area for 10 minutes at a time. Allow the skin temperature to return to normal before icing a second or third time. You can ice an acute injury several times a day for up to three days.

Cold therapy is also helpful in treating some overuse injuries or chronic pain in athletes. An athlete who has chronic knee pain that increases after running may want to ice the injured area *after* each run to reduce or prevent inflammation.

The best way to ice an injury is with a high quality ice pack that conforms to the body part being iced. Examples include [ColdOne Cold Therapy Wraps](#) and [SnowPack Cold Therapy](#) products. You can also get good results from a bag of frozen peas, an ice massage with water frozen in a paper cup (peel the cup down as the ice melts) or a bag of ice.

Read more about [how to safely use ice on injuries](#).

Heat Therapy

Heat is generally used for chronic injuries or injuries that have no inflammation or swelling. Sore, stiff, nagging muscle or joint pain is ideal for the use of heat therapy. Athletes with chronic pain or injuries may use heat therapy *before* exercise to increase the elasticity of joint connective tissues and to stimulate blood flow. Heat can also help relax tight muscles or muscle spasms. Don't apply heat after exercise. After a workout, ice is the better choice on a chronic injury.

Because heat increases circulation and raises skin temperature, you should not apply heat to acute injuries or injuries that show signs of inflammation. Safely apply heat to an injury 15 to 20 minutes at a time and use enough layers between your skin and the heating source to prevent burns.

Moist heat is best, so you could try using a hot wet towel. You can buy special athletic hot packs or heating pads if you use heat often. Never leave heating pads on for more than 20 minutes at a time or while sleeping.

Because some injuries can be serious, you should see your doctor if your injury does not improve (or gets worse) within 48 hours.

Healing Times

Healing from sports injuries takes time. To reduce your time on the sidelines, get [immediate first aid treatment](#) for any injury. This will reduce your healing time and improve your total recovery. After the initial inflammation and swelling is controlled, healing begins.

Although healing times vary from person to person, athletes tend to have a better blood supply and heal faster than those with chronic illness, smokers, or those with sedentary lifestyles. A good blood supply speeds healing by moving nutrients, oxygen, and infection fighting cells to the damaged area.

Keep in mind that you can not force yourself to heal -- you can only allow yourself to heal.

Average Healing Times

For someone in reasonable shape, without any chronic illness, the following list provides an estimate of the time it may take to recover from some common sports injuries:

Fractures

- [Simple fractures](#): A fractured bone generally takes at least 6 weeks to heal. The time any fracture takes to heal depends upon the type of fracture and where it's located.
- [Fractured Finger](#) or Toe: These fractures typically heal in three to five weeks.
- [Fractured Clavicle](#): This may take five to ten weeks to heal.

Sprains and Strains

- [Sprained Ankle](#): Minor ankles sprains will heal in five days, while a more severe sprain can take from three to six weeks to heal.
- [Calf Strain, Pull or Tear](#): A minor (grade 1) calf strain may heal in two weeks, while a severe (grade 3) strain may require up to three months or more to heal completely.

Other Sports Injuries

- [Cuts, Abrasions and Lacerations](#): Cuts and abrasions take anywhere from a week to a month to heal, depending upon the depth and location of the injury and how it's treated.
- Mild Contusion or Bruise: This often occurs from a hard blow or even a mild bump to the skin in which blood vessels are broken. A black and blue or purple patch often appears on the skin when blood leaks into the top layers of skin. Contusions generally heal in about five days.
- [Pulled Groin Muscle](#): This may take a few days to several weeks to heal. Your healing time depends upon the severity of the muscle pull.
- [Mild Shoulder Separation](#): Give yourself about two weeks to return to activity after a shoulder separation.
- [Achilles Tendon Rupture](#): This will take from four to six months to heal.
- [ACL Repair](#): A complete ACL repair often takes about five months to completely heal.

The amount of time needed for full recovery after an injury depends on a variety of factors, but it's helpful to be patient and [learn to cope with an injury](#) while you allow your body to heal.