Ankle Sprain

General Information

An ankle sprain is an injury where one or more ligaments in your ankle have been stretched or torn. A ligament is a band of tough, fibrous tissue connecting two or more bones at a joint. Ligaments at your ankle joint connect the ends of your two lower leg bones (tibia and fibula) with your ankle bone (talus).

Most ankle sprains occur when an ankle turns in. This can happen while someone is running, turning, falling or landing on an ankle after a jump.

Signs of an Ankle Sprain and the Levels of Severity

The usual signs of a sprain are:

- having pain, swelling or bruising
- losing the ability to move and use the joint (loss of function)
- feeling a pop or tear for severe sprains.

There are three levels of severity for sprains.

- **Grade 1** — a mild sprain, indicated by minimal pain and swelling. Ligaments are overstretched or may have a slight tear, but the joint is stable. If you have a grade 1 ankle sprain, you will most likely be able to put weight on the joint. Your health care provider may order an X-ray.
- **Grade 2** — a moderate sprain, indicated by bruising, moderate pain and swelling. Ligaments are partially torn. With a grade 2 ankle sprain, you may have trouble putting weight on the joint. You may lose ankle function. You may have an X-ray to see if you have a bone fracture. You may have a hard cast applied to your ankle.
- **Grade 3** — a severe sprain, indicated by severe bruising, pain and swelling. Ligaments are completely torn or ruptured. With a grade 3 ankle sprain, you will not be able to put weight on the joint. You will most likely have an X-ray to check for a broken bone. You may have a hard cast appled to your ankle. Sometimes torn ligaments require surgery to repair them.

Treating Sprains

Treating sprains is a two-step process. The first step is to reduce any swelling and pain you have. The second step is to restore the function and strength of your ankle joint. Your health care provider may call this step rehabilitation.

Reduce swelling and pain

Your health care provider may advise RICE therapy for the first 24 to 48 hours after your injury.

- **Rest**. Cut back on exercise and daily activities as needed. If you can't put weight on your injured ankle, crutches or a cane may help.

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- **Ice**. Put a cold pack or bag of ice on your ankle 4 to 8 times a day for 20 minutes at a time. To avoid injury from the cold source, wrap it in a towel and do not use it for more than 20 minutes at a time.
- **Compression**. Ask your health care provider about compressing your ankle to reduce swelling. He or she might suggest an elastic wrap, a special boot, an air cast or a splint.
- **Elevation**. Try to keep your injured ankle elevated above the level of your heart. This may help reduce swelling.

Your health care provider may also prescribe a medicine or suggest an over-the-counter product to help reduce pain and swelling.

Restore function and strength

It is important to restore the function and strength of your ankle joint. This will allow you to resume daily activities with your ankle moving freely and without pain. Your health car provider may prescribe exercises for you. Or you may be referred to a physical therapist.

Recovery Time

If you have a moderate sprain, it may take 3 to 6 weeks of exercises before your ankle returns to normal. For a severe sprain, it may be 8 to 12 months before the ligament is fully healed.

Information adapted from the National Institute of Arthritis and Musculosketal and Skin Diseases of the National Institutes of Health.

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