



Patient Information

Caring for Ankle Sprains

One of the most common athletic injuries is an ankle sprain. A sprain occurs when the ligaments connecting bones of the ankle are stretched, partially ruptured or completely torn. This generally happens when weight is applied to the foot while on an uneven surface and the foot “rolls in.” Many patients report hearing a pop or snap at the time of injury. This is usually followed by pain and swelling along the outside of the ankle.

Treat Immediately

If treated promptly, ankle sprains heal well and you can return to play within a matter of days. However, if you ignore the sprain, significant swelling will keep you out of competition for weeks, maybe even months.

So, if you think you have sprained your ankle, seek immediate medical attention. Once you do, and a sprain is diagnosed, your NP will grade it according to its degree of severity. The more severe a sprain, the higher its degree and the more time is needed to recover.

Classifying Ankle Sprains

First-degree ankle sprains are the most common. In this injury, the ligaments are stretched, but not torn. First-degree sprains are accompanied by very mild swelling and no substantial instability. If you have a first-degree sprain, you are usually able to put weight on the injured ankle immediately after injury.

A second-degree sprain involves partial tearing of the ligaments. In this type of injury, swelling and pain are more significant, but you can probably bear some weight on the ankle. You might temporarily lose some ankle function with a second-degree sprain.

A complete tear of one or more ligaments is classified as a third-degree ankle sprain. This sprain is accompanied by extensive swelling and bruising. Also, functional and clinical instability of the ankle are present, meaning that normal ankle function is not possible.

Treatment

Initial treatment focuses on calming inflammation and halting swelling. This is achieved with a regimen known as RICE:

- **Rest:** No weight bearing for the first 24 hours, or longer, depending on the severity.
- **Ice:** Apply ice packs to the painful area, intermittently, for the first 24 hours.
- **Compression:** Wrap an elastic bandage around the ankle to control swelling.
- **Elevation:** Elevate the injured ankle higher than the hip (or heart). This uses gravity to prevent swelling.

During the first 24 hours post-injury, avoid things that will increase swelling, such as hot showers, alcohol consumption, heat rubs and aspirin.

Rehabilitating the Ankle

Ligaments take at least 6 weeks to heal, and swelling may be present for months. You will need to regain your range of motion with bending and straightening exercises. These will keep your ankle from becoming stiff.

Next, you will need to strengthen the muscles around the ankle. Isometrics, or strengthening exercises in which the muscles are working but the joint remains still, will probably be used in the early stages of recovery. These allow you to exercise the ankle at different angles, while steering clear of the most painful positions. Isometrics will help reduce pain and swelling.

Balance exercises are especially important after an injury to an ankle ligament. Once a ligament has been injured, nerves are unable to receive and send necessary information to the brain about the ankle’s position. Balance exercises help restore this communication by retraining the nerves.

The final stage of rehabilitation consists of further strengthening exercises. Once you return to activity, an ankle brace or wrap might be necessary for the first few months to prevent re-injury.

Additional Notes:

Your nurse practitioner has given you this patient education handout to further explain or remind you about principles related to your medical condition. This handout is a general guide only. If you have specific questions, be sure to discuss them with your nurse practitioner.