

# Soft tissue sprains and strains

Staff Information Leaflet

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**This leaflet is designed to give you an understanding of soft tissue sprains and strains, the treatment that may be beneficial and some advice on what you can do to help yourself. If your symptoms persist you should seek advice from your GP or Occupational health service.**

## Introduction

The term 'soft tissue' usually refers to one or more of the following structures:

- Muscle – muscles are made up of fibres that shorten and lengthen to produce movement of a joint. Muscles are attached to bone by tendons.
- Tendon – tendons consist of slightly elastic (tough) connective tissue that connects muscle to bone.
- Ligament – ligaments are strong bands of inelastic connective tissue that connect bone to bone.

## Types of Soft Tissues Injuries

### Bruise or Contusion

Bruises are often caused by a direct force to the body such as being kicked but can happen after any injury where the tissues are damaged and bleed. **Signs and Symptoms:** Pain, swelling and/or discolouration.



### Sprain

Sprains are caused when a structure is forced beyond its normal range of motion resulting in overstretching and/or tearing. **Signs and Symptoms:** Pain, swelling, loss of power or ability to bear weight, possible discolouration and bruising and/or instability / feeling of giving way.

### Strain

Strains are caused by muscles over-stretching, contracting too quickly, or working against a force they cannot manage. This results in a partial or complete tear of the muscle and/or tendon fibres. **Signs and Symptoms:** Pain, swelling, possible discolouration and bruising and/or weakness affecting the muscle involved.



### Overuse

Overuse injuries occur as a result of repetitive activity e.g. friction, pulling, twisting, or compression and develop over time. **Signs and Symptoms:** Symptoms develop gradually and include inflammation and pain on use of the affected soft tissues.

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Pain and stiffness is often caused by swelling at the injury site. Swelling is an important part of the healing process but excessive swelling can restrict movement and prolong the pain.

## What can I do to help myself?

Quick and appropriate action is very important for recovery!  
(Within 24 hours)

Full recovery from most soft tissue injuries will take around six weeks.

## What to avoid

A good way to remember what to avoid is to think of the acronym 'H.A.R.M'.

**H:** Do not heat the area

**A:** Avoid alcohol

**R:** Avoid running or excessive activity

**M:** Do not massage the area.

This will help to reduce bleeding and swelling in the injured area.

## Pain relief

Simple analgesia such as paracetamol and an anti-inflammatory such as Ibuprofen can be very effective for the treatment of sprains and strains. You can obtain advice regarding medication from your local pharmacist or G.P, but remember to read the packet and do not take over the recommended dosage.

Topical anti-inflammatory products in the form of a cream or gel can also be used. These are applied directly to the specific area of pain, providing the skin is not broken. They can help reduce the pain and inflammation without the side effects of the anti-inflammatory tablets. For further information you should discuss this option with your GP or pharmacist.

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## P.R.I.C.E.

To help reduce the amount of bleeding and swelling at the injury site you can follow this simple routine.

**P**rotection

**R**est

**I**ce

**C**ompression

**E**levation

The 'PRICE' protocol should be followed for 48–72 hours. The aim is to reduce the bleeding and damage of the affected area.

### Protection (0-6 days)

It is important to try and protect injured tissues from unnecessary stress for at least three days. This protection may include:

- **Walking aids** to reduce weight on limbs
- **Simple bandaging**, slings or splints
- **Avoiding the most aggravating activities** e.g. keep moving but don't overload the injured area.

It is important that the injured area is protected but still allowed to have some movement.

### Rest (0-7 days)

An initial period of relative rest is advisable. This means using the area normally and as your pain allows, but avoiding excessive activities such as sport

### Ice (0-3 days)

Ice can be very effective in reducing the pain that results from sprains and strains.

**Do not use ice if you have circulatory problems, such as Raynaud's disease, history of cold induced hypertension, peripheral vascular disease, allergy to cold (urticaria, joint pain) or sickle cell anaemia. If your skin is usually numb over the injured area, please speak to your physiotherapist or GP before using a cold pack / ice.**

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Ice must be used correctly otherwise ice burns can occur. Please see the instructions below:

- Start by wetting a cloth under a cold tap and then wring the cloth out until it is just damp.
- Place the damp cloth over affected area and then place either a plastic bag of crushed ice or a packet of frozen peas on top of the cloth. (The ice should be in small pieces in order to mould better to the area and help prevent ice burns).
- Leave the ice pack and cloth in place for approximately 10-15 minutes and repeat 3 to 4 times a day.

It is normal for your skin to go slightly red or pink. Remove the ice if extreme redness/pain, blistering or an increase in swelling occurs. If this does occur, please call NHS Direct for further advice.

### Compression (0-3 days)

Using a tubigrip or another form of compression bandage for the first 72 hours can help to reduce ankle swelling. This should be snug but not so tight that it restricts blood flow. You should remove the bandage before you go to sleep and to do the gentle ankle exercises.

### Elevation (0-3 days)

When at rest try to elevate the injured area as frequently as possible. This will help manage the swelling.

## Activity

### Exercises

Once the initial symptoms have started to improve, it is important to regain any flexibility, strength or fitness you may have lost. Moving the injured body part up, down, in and out ten times every couple of hours can help you regain some of the movement you may have lost.

**Do not** continue these movements if they significantly increase your pain or swelling. If this were to occur, please see your GP / Physiotherapist for further advice.

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## What about work?

Maintaining all normal activities including work improves your chance of recovery. Working in discomfort will not lead to long term problems and has been shown to reduce the risk of re-injury. It also helps to regain any strength that has been lost in the early stages when the pain stopped you moving normally.

Stay active at work or return to work as soon as possible, with temporary lighter or modified duties if necessary. This helps you keep your 'work fitness' and prevents your body getting weak, which can prolong your pain. If it is required you can discuss lighter roles with your manager

*Remember... You do not have to be pain free to return to or remain at work.*

## What should I do if I am still experiencing problems?

If you are unable to agree on restricted roles with you manager or you are still having problems despite following this advice then your Occupational Health team or doctor can help. The Occupational Health team can advise you on how to bridge the gap to help you return to normal activities. You can also gain access to the Occupational Health physiotherapist by:

### Self referral

The Occupational Health service provides assessment and treatment of musculoskeletal problems that affect your ability to work. Staff are able to self refer to physiotherapy via the intranet Occupational Health web page

<http://nuth-vintranet1/cms/SupportServices/OccupationalHealth.aspx>

### Management referral

If you feel your symptoms are having significant effect on your ability to carry out your role, discuss this with your manager and request a referral to the Occupational Health Physiotherapy team. The physiotherapist can assess you and advise you on how to keep safe at work and avoid further problems. Any information you share will be considered confidential and will only be passed on with your permission.

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For more information on soft tissue injuries or how to stay active, why not try:



[www.nhs.uk/Pages/HomePage.aspx](http://www.nhs.uk/Pages/HomePage.aspx)



[www.nhsinform.co.uk](http://www.nhsinform.co.uk)



[www.activenewcastle.co.uk/](http://www.activenewcastle.co.uk/)

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