

Sprains and Strains

You stretch just a little too far for your tennis partner's lob and. . . down you go, right onto your wrist. Or, you don't see the edge of the curb and step down *really* hard, twisting your ankle. Yikes! Did you break a bone? Or is it simply a sprain or strain? How can you know for sure?

A sprain occurs when you force a joint out of its normal position, stretching or tearing a ligament. This is fibrous tissue that connects bone to bone at your joints. Ankles are the site of more than 25,000 sprains in the U.S. each day. The telltale signs of a sprain are pain, swelling, bruising, and trouble moving the injured joint. You might also hear a pop or tear during the injury.

A strain, on the other hand, involves stretched or torn muscles or tendons, which are fibrous cords of tissue that connect muscles to bones. Strains can happen suddenly from twisting or pulling or from overuse over time. Your back and the back of your thigh are two common sites of strains. Symptoms are similar to those of sprains: pain, muscle spasm, swelling, or trouble moving an injured joint.

How can you know whether to see a doctor or try self-care? Don't put off a trip to your doctor if you have any of these signs or symptoms:

- A popping sound at the time of injury
- Severe pain, or pain, swelling, or redness over a bony part
- Joint numbness
- Lumps or bumps around the joint
- Trouble moving the joint or bearing weight
- Repeated injury to a joint

If you have a severe sprain, your doctor may recommend a brace or hard cast to protect tissues while they're healing. In some cases, surgery is needed. In most cases, though, self-care fits the bill. During the first 48 hours, remember P.R.I.C.E.:

- **Protect.** If needed, protect the joint with crutches or splints.
- **Rest.** Don't avoid all activity, but rest the injured area.
- **Ice.** Do this for 20 minutes at a time, four to eight times daily. Use a cold pack, bag of peas, or crushed ice wrapped inside a thin towel.
- **Compress.** Elastic wraps or bandages can do the trick. If needed, ask me for guidance on these products.
- **Elevate.** Keep the injured joint above the level of your heart as much as possible.

In addition, you may need nonsteroidal anti-inflammatories (NSAIDs), such as aspirin or ibuprofen to decrease pain and swelling.

After the first couple of days, begin gently using the injured area. Gentle exercises may help reduce stiffness, and improve flexibility and strength. Swimming or aquatic

workouts may be great options while you heal. Ask your health care provider when it's safe to return to sports.

Remember: you can prevent most strains and sprains by stretching daily, warming up before exercise, maintaining a healthy weight, strengthening any weak muscles, and wearing supportive shoes.

SOURCES

1. National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases website. "Sprains and Strains."
http://www.niams.nih.gov/Health_Info/Sprains_Strains/default.asp
2. MedlinePlus website. "Sprains and Strains."
<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/sprainsandstrains.html>
3. Mayo Clinic website. "Sprains and strains."
<http://www.mayoclinic.com/print/sprains-and-strains/DS00343/DSECTION=all&METHOD=print>