

Soft tissue injuries & RICE treatment

Strains and sprains are common soft tissue injuries. They can affect your muscles, tendons, joint capsules and ligaments. They usually happen because of twisting, stretching or tearing caused by a sudden movement or landing awkwardly. Strains affect muscles or tendons. A sprain happens when a ligament is torn or twisted.



Recognising a strain or sprain

The symptoms will depend on the area injured and the extent of injury, but they may include:

- pain
- difficulty moving the affected area
- swelling and bruising.

Helping someone who has a strain or sprain

You can do a lot to make sure you recover as quickly as possible or to help someone else. The four steps to treat strains and sprains are RICE – Rest, Ice, Compression and Elevation.

The activities to avoid when recovering from a strain or sprain are HARM – Heat, Alcohol, Run (exercise) and Massage.

Do: RICE

REST – Stop exercising immediately. Sit or lie down supporting the affected area in a comfortable position. You may need to rest the affected limb for up to 24 hours before starting gentle movement.

This prevents further damage and bleeding.

ICE – Put crushed ice in a damp towel moulded over the damaged area. Remove the pack after 10 to 20 minutes. During the first 24 to 48 hours, apply ice regularly four to eight times a day.

This reduces swelling, pain and bruising.

COMPRESSION – Wrap the damaged area firmly but comfortably for the first few days with a bandage or compression stocking. Take it off at night and put it back on the next day to prevent discomfort.

This reduces bleeding and swelling, as well as providing support.

ELEVATION – Raise the injured limb, ideally above the level of your heart. Support it with a soft cushion.

This helps to reduce swelling.

It's important that you pump your fingers and toes regularly and put them through a full range of movement, as this also helps to reduce swelling.



Don't: HARM

HEAT – Don't apply any heat or deep heat creams, as these increase bleeding.

ALCOHOL – Don't drink alcohol, as it increases swelling.

RUN – Don't run or exercise too soon, as this can make the injury worse.

MASSAGE – Don't massage the injured area, as this will increase swelling and bleeding.

After resting your injured limb for 48 hours (or longer if a health professional tells you to), the pain and swelling should improve. You should be able to begin to use the injured limb by taking the joint gently through its normal range of movement.

A soft tissue injury is often just as painful the next day. It may take several days for the swelling to go down and the bruising to come out. Gently moving your limb won't damage it.

Don't force movements of your injured limb and stop if it gets too painful.

Getting medical help

If despite the RICE treatment, the injury doesn't improve in a few days, see your health professional to assess it.

Simple pain relief such as paracetamol or paracetamol and codeine should provide enough pain relief.

Written by HealthInfo clinical advisers. Last reviewed November 2019.