

Rehabilitation after Ankle Sprains

Ankle sprains are among the most commonly experienced athletic injuries. Injury or sprain occurs when the stout ligaments connecting bones or the ankle is either stretched, partially ruptured, or completely torn. The most common complaint occurs when the athlete feels their ankle “turn under.” The onset of pain and swelling is immediate and can be debilitating. However, in most cases, if treated quickly and properly, ankle sprains can heal completely, allowing a safe and early return to sport. If the sprain is ignored, swelling can occur which may keep the athlete out of competition for weeks and even months.

Some of the contributing factors to an ankle sprain can be

- Previous Injury
- Muscle weakness or imbalance
- Inappropriate footwear
- Being overweight
- High Arch Foot

Ankle Sprains are graded by providers in terms of degrees of severity. The more severe the sprain, the higher the degree and the longer the time to recover.

1. *FIRST DEGREE* – This injury is the most common, and if not neglected, the most minor. In this injury the connecting ligaments are “stretched,” causing a small amount of superficial tearing of the ankle ligaments. There can be a small amount of swelling but no instability. Most individuals can return to sports within 1 to 3 weeks.
2. *SECOND DEGREE* – This injury involves a partial tearing of the ligament resulting in immediate pain and swelling. There can be bruising and pain with walking. Some instability can be experienced. A second-degree sprain may require the use of a brace and 3 to 6 weeks of rest before returning to sports and full activity.
3. *THIRD DEGREE* – This injury involves a full rupture of the ligament (s). The ankle can be very swollen and weight bearing is often painful. Crutches are often necessary and sometimes a cast or walking boot may be applied to allow the injury time to rest and heal. Surgery is rarely necessary, but the sprain can take many months to heal fully.

Treatment

Treatment is divided into stages. The rate of progress is completely individualistic and will depend on the amount of pain and swelling that you have.

1. *STAGE I* – Initial treatment is very important following an ankle sprain. The model of R.I.C.E. applies. *Rest* the ankle. *Ice* is extremely important and should be applied for 20 minutes of every hour while awake. Be sure to put a towel between your skin and the ice for protection. Compression of the ankle either with an elastic bandage or proper taping will help to limit swelling and support your extremity. *Elevate* your ankle above your heart for the first 48 hours. You should also take anti-inflammatory/analgesic medications to relieve pain and swelling.
2. *STAGE II* – (Week One) You can walk and bear weight on the ankle as soon as it is comfortable. Crutches can be used as partial support when you begin to walk. Further support may be needed with continued use of taping, bracing, or cast. Let pain be your guide as to how much you can do.
3. *STAGE III* – (Second Week and After) The crucial part of the treatment for ankle sprains is a rehabilitation program to regain ankle range of motion and strengthen the supporting muscles. You will be shown a variety of exercises to assist in this
4. *STAGE IV* – Your ankle must be strong before you may return to sports or full daily activity. Returning too early may lead to re-injury and a chronic problem.

It is important that you complete the rehabilitation program because it makes it less likely that you'll hurt the same ankle again. If you don't complete the program, you could suffer chronic pain, instability and arthritis in your ankle.

Continuing with the exercises even once the ankle has healed will assist in allowing the ankle to remain strong. Pay attention to your body's warning signs to slow down when you feel pain or fatigue, and stay in shape with good muscle balance, flexibility and strength.