Sprains and Strains

A sprain is an injury to a ligament (tissue that connects two or more bones at a joint). In a sprain, one or more ligaments is stretched or torn. A sprain can result from a fall, a sudden twist, or a blow to the body that forces a joint out of its normal position and stretches or tears the ligament supporting that joint. Sprains usually occur when people fall and land on an outstretched arm, land on the side of their foot, or twist a knee with the foot planted firmly on the ground. The usual signs and symptoms of a sprain include pain, swelling, bruising, instability, and loss of the ability to move and use the joint. However, these signs and symptoms can vary in intensity, depending on the severity of the sprain. Sometimes, people feel a "pop" or tear when the injury happens.



A strain is caused by twisting or pulling a muscle or tendon. An acute strain is associated with a recent trauma or injury; it can also occur after improperly lifting heavy objects or overstressing

the muscles. Chronic strains usually result from overuse: prolonged, repetitive movement of the muscles and tendons. Two common sites for a strain are the back and the hamstring muscle (in the back of the thigh). Typically, people with a strain experience pain, limited motion, muscle spasms, and possibly muscle weakness. They can also have localized swelling, cramping, or inflammation and—with a minor or moderate strain—usually some loss of muscle function. People with a strain typically experience pain in the injured area and general weakness of the muscle when they try to move it. Severe strains—strains that partially or completely tear the muscle or tendon—are often very painful and disabling.

Treatments for sprains and strains are similar. To reduce swelling and pain during the first day or two, health care providers usually advise you to:

- Rest the injured area. If your ankle or knee is hurt, you might be advised to use crutches
 or a cane.
- Apply ice on the injury for 20 minutes at a time, 4 to 8 times a day. You can use a cold pack, ice bag, or plastic bag filled with crushed ice and wrapped in a towel.
- Compress (squeeze) the injury using special bandages, casts, boots, or splints. This may help reduce swelling. Your health care provider will advise which is best for you.



- Elevate the injured area on a pillow—above the level of the heart—to help decrease swelling.
- Take medicines, such as aspirin or ibuprofen, as advised.

If you have any concerns about the seriousness of a sprain or strain, you should contact your health care provider. You may need physical therapy. You should see a health care provider for a sprain when:

- You have severe pain and cannot put any weight on the injured joint.
- The injured area looks crooked or has lumps and bumps (other than swelling) that you do
 not see on the uninjured joint.
- You cannot move the injured joint.
- You cannot walk more than four steps without significant pain.
- Your limb buckles or gives way when you try to use the joint.
- You have numbness, coolness, or discoloration in any part of the injured area.
- You see redness or red streaks spreading out from the injury.
- You injure an area that has been injured several times before.
- You have pain, swelling, or redness over a bony part of your foot.
- You are in doubt about the seriousness of the injury or how to care for it.