

Patient information from BMJ

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Ankle sprain

A sprained ankle can be painful and swollen. You may find it hard to walk. But most people make a good recovery within a few weeks or months.

What is an ankle sprain?

When you sprain your ankle you damage the bands of tissue (called ligaments) that connect your bones together at the ankle joint.

You can also get an injury known as a strain. This is different to a sprain. A strain happens when you stretch or pull a muscle rather than a ligament.

What are the symptoms?

Your sprained ankle will be painful, swollen, and probably bruised, and it may feel warm to touch. You might find it hard to move your foot, to walk, or even to stand at first.

You might have felt a pop or tear when you twisted your ankle. This could mean you've completely torn or ruptured the ligaments. This type of sprain is the most serious.

You should see a doctor if your ankle is very swollen and you find it hard to stand. Your doctor may gently feel how tender your bone is and see if you can walk four steps. This is to decide if you need an x-ray to check whether you've fractured a bone.

What treatments work?

The first thing you need to do is something that doctors and physiotherapists call RICE. This stands for Rest, Ice, Compression, and Elevation. It helps to bring down the swelling and reduce pain.

Rest means just that: you try not to walk too much for a day or two. Put your weight on the injured ankle as little as possible until the worst of the pain and swelling have died down.

Ice means using ice to reduce swelling soon after a sprain. You can either put the injured foot in ice water for up to 10 minutes, or put some ice wrapped in a thin cloth onto the injured ankle for up to 30 minutes. A bag of frozen peas wrapped in a cloth works well if you don't

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have ice. You shouldn't use ice for too long on the skin, or use it without wrapping it in a cloth, or you could get an ice 'burn'.

You can use ice on the sprain every few hours for the first two days. But after the first two days this treatment won't help.

Compression means put a fairly tight bandage, for example, an elastic bandage, onto the injured ankle. The bandage should be comfortable, and not so tight that you restrict blood circulation.

Elevation means put your feet up: rest your injured foot on a footstool or table when you sit down.

RICE can help in the early hours or days after a sprain. But when the worst of the pain and swelling have gone you should start getting up and about.

To move about more easily you may also need to support your ankle with an elastic bandage. Getting moving early should reduce swelling and help you get back to normal faster. It is better to do this than to rest without moving for too long. Moving early can also help to protect your ankle from giving way again in future.

You might also want to take something for the pain, such as aspirin, ibuprofen, or paracetamol. Aspirin and ibuprofen reduce inflammation (swelling) as well as pain, so you might want to try one of these first. Aspirin should not be given to anyone under 18.

If you take ibuprofen or aspirin regularly, this can irritate your stomach or cause stomach ulcers. But it shouldn't be a problem if you're taking them for only three or four days.

Other treatments

Physiotherapists sometimes use diathermy to 'deep heat' a swollen ankle with electromagnetic energy. But there's no evidence that any kind of heat treatment will reduce swelling or pain. Deep heat creams do no more than heat the skin and won't help.

Surgery

Most people with a sprained ankle don't need surgery and it's unlikely to help. Even people with severe sprains or even torn ligaments are unlikely to need surgery unless they routinely put a lot of pressure on their ankle: for example, if they play a lot of sport.

Surgery has risks. There's a chance the nerves in your foot could get damaged. There's also a risk of an infection, bleeding, or osteoarthritis (swollen joints).

What will happen to me?

Most people make a good recovery from ankle sprains, but more serious sprains need longer to heal. It can take up to a year for severe sprains to be pain free.

Severe muscle and ligament tears may not heal completely, and can lead to some longer-term pain and loss of stability.

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