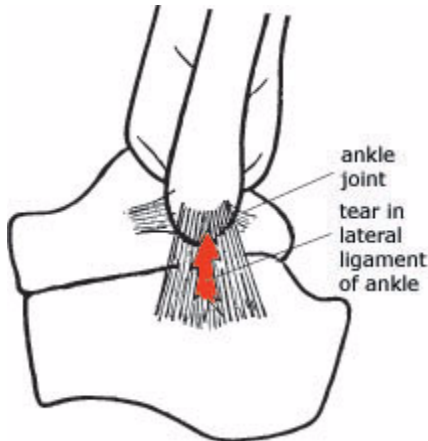


Sprained ankle

What is a sprained ankle?

A *sprain* occurs when there is damage to the ligaments that bind the bones of the ankle joint. The fibres of the ligament that has been overstretched tear and then bleed. The tear is usually minor, involving a small number of fibres, but sometimes the ligament can be completely torn.



Sprained ankle

What is the cause?

The cause is a sudden twist of the foot inwards so that the ligaments on the outside of the ankle are overstretched, rather like tearing an overstretched piece of material. Sometimes the inside of the ankle is sprained when the foot twists outwards.

What are the symptoms?

The symptoms depend on the extent of the damage. Pain, swelling, bruising and tenderness of the injured area usually occur and vary from mild to severe. With a complete tear the ankle joint will go out of shape and feel unstable.

How common is the problem?

Sprained ankles are very common. In an average year, at least 1 person in 50 consults a doctor about this injury.

What is the treatment?

For a mild sprain, self-help measures are usually sufficient. However, a severe sprain requires an X-ray, since there may be a fracture or a complete tear. Sometimes the discomfort of a sprain settles quickly, but should it persist beyond 3-4 days a visit to your doctor is advisable. Your doctor may apply a special strapping.

Self-help

This includes following the 'RICE' formula:

- Rest** Rest as much as possible. If the sprain is severe, use crutches to take the weight off the ankle.
- Ice** Apply icepacks and/or soak the ankle in cold water to reduce swelling and pain. Use a special reusable compress (e.g. ACE wrap) or a packet of frozen peas or beans or wrap ice-cubes in a damp tea-towel; never apply ice directly to the skin. Use the icepack for about 20-30 minutes every 3 hours when awake for the first 48 hours. (Icepacks can be placed over a bandage.)
- Compression** Compress and support the ankle with a firm (not tight) elastic bandage.
- Elevation** Elevate the leg on a stool or chair until the swelling goes.

Exercise program

Exercises started early will help prevent permanent stiffness. Exercise every hour up to the point of discomfort. Do each exercise at least 10 times.

1. Firmly flap your foot up and down at the ankle joint.
2. Rotate your foot inwards and outwards, keeping the foot at right angles to the leg.
3. Combine these exercises so that your foot moves slowly in a circle (clockwise, then anticlockwise).

Pain-killers

Take analgesics for pain, especially at night. Paracetamol with or without codeine is usually sufficient.

Walking

Walking with your ankle supported in comfortable walking shoes is recommended for short distances. Walk as normally as possible, but avoid standing still for long periods. Walking without shoes in sand is an excellent way of strengthening your ankle quickly (after the first 2-3 days).

What is the outcome?

For most sprains you can expect full recovery in 1-6 weeks, but severe sprains with complete tearing take longer, as a plaster cast for 4-6 weeks or surgery may be necessary.