

First Aid: Sprains and Fractures



A sprain happens when the ligaments, or fibrous tissue, connecting bones at a joint pulls or tears. Most sprains hurt, and some take even longer than a broken bone to heal. A fracture may happen when a bone is hit with more force than it can bear.

Note

If a bad sprain or a fracture occurs and you can't get first-aid supplies, make do with what's on hand and call for help right away:

- A broken leg can be splinted to the good leg. You can also use a rolled-up towel as a splint.
- Keep the arm from moving by cradling it in a sling. Fold a bandana or scarf into a triangle and tie it behind the neck. Or the bottom of a shirt can be safely pinned up to the top of a shirt, creating a makeshift sling.

1. Control any bleeding

Here are two ways to control bleeding:

- Apply direct pressure to the source of the bleeding with gauze or a cloth to stop the bleeding.
- If a bone has broken through the skin, cover the wound with loosely wrapped gauze or cloth. Don't increase damage by pressing directly on the bone or pushing it back into place.

2. Keep the injured area from moving

Do's and don'ts for not moving the injury:

- Put a rigid material (splint) next to the injury, and tie or tape it in place. Secure the splint above and below the injury.
- Don't increase damage by straightening an injury.
- Don't secure the splint too tight. If toes or fingers become pale, cold, or numb, loosen the splint immediately.
- If you suspect the joint is dislocated, rest, elevate, and apply ice to the joint.

3. Ice and elevate

Tips to ice and raise the injury:

- Place ice or a cold pack on the injury for 20 minutes every 3 to 4 hours to limit swelling and pain. Wrap the ice or cold pack in a thin towel before putting it on the skin to prevent cold injury to the skin.
- If possible, raise the injury above the heart to ease swelling.

When to get medical help

Get medical help right away if any of the following is true:

- The injury has forced a joint beyond its normal range of motion and now the joint won't work.
- A strong force, such as a fall, placed great stress on a bone or joint, especially if a snap was heard.
- The joint or limb looks crooked or bowed.
- You have reason to believe a bone is broken.
- You have numbness, tingling, or a pale, cool limb.

Call 911

Call 911 right away if any of the following is true:

- Bone is sticking out through the skin.
- The victim has decreased feeling or movement in the arms or legs. Also call 911 if the victim has pain in the neck or back (a possible spinal cord injury). While you wait for emergency services to arrive:
 - Keep the victim's head, neck, and back exactly as you found them. If available, place heavy objects around the body to support their body and neck. This will help prevent further injury. Or hold the head still with your hands.
 - Move the victim only to save their life. Lift the body as one unit, supporting the head, midsection, and legs. Don't straighten the victim, elevate the legs, or tip the head in any direction.

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