

# Sprains and strains

Sprains and strains are common injuries that affect the muscles and ligaments. You can treat most sprains and strains at home without seeing your GP.

## Symptoms of sprains or strains

You may have a sprain or strain if:

- you have pain, tenderness or weakness – often around your ankle, foot, wrist, thumb, knee, leg or back
- the injured area is swollen or bruised
- you cannot put weight on the injury or use it normally
- you have muscle spasms or cramping, where your muscles painfully tighten on their own

## Sprain

A sprain is a torn or twisted ligament. A ligament is tissue that connects the joints.

Sprains are most common in your wrists, ankles, thumbs and knees.

## Strain

A strain is an overstretched or torn muscle. Sometimes it's called a pulled muscle.

Strains are most common in your knees, feet, legs and back.

## Treating sprains and strains at home

For the first couple of days, follow the 4 steps known as RICE therapy. They help bring down swelling and support the injury.

RICE therapy includes:

1. Rest – stop any exercise or activities and try not to put any weight on the injury.
2. Ice – put an ice pack (or a bag of frozen vegetables wrapped in a tea towel) on the injury for up to 20 minutes every 2 to 3 hours.
3. Compression – wrap a bandage around the injury to support it.

4. Elevate – keep the area raised on a pillow as much as possible.

To help prevent swelling, try to avoid heat, alcohol and massages for the first couple of days. This includes hot baths and heat packs.

When you can move the injured area without pain stopping you, try to keep moving it. This is so the joint or muscle does not become stiff.

## When to see a pharmacist

Speak to a pharmacist about the best treatment for you. They might suggest tablets or a cream or gel you rub on the skin.

Painkillers like paracetamol can ease the pain.

Ibuprofen can bring down swelling. But you should not take ibuprofen for 48 hours after your injury because it may slow down healing.

## How long it takes for a sprain or strain to heal

After 2 weeks, most sprains and strains will feel better.

Avoid strenuous exercise such as running for up to 8 weeks. There's a risk you could do more damage.

Severe sprains and strains can take months to get back to normal.

## When to see your GP

See your GP if:

- the injury is not feeling any better after treating it yourself
- the pain or swelling is getting worse
- you also have a very high temperature or feel hot and shivery – this could be an infection


Your GP can give you advice or prescribe a stronger painkiller. If you need an x-ray, your GP may refer you to an [injury unit](#) or a hospital.

If you have a sprain or strain that's taking longer than usual to get better, your GP may refer you to a physiotherapist.

### Go to your nearest injury unit or emergency department (ED) if:

- you heard a crack when you had your injury - this may mean you have a broken bone
- the injured body part has changed shape
- the injury is numb, discoloured or cold to touch

You may have broken a bone and will need an x-ray.

 Find your nearest injury unit

 Find your nearest emergency department

## Preventing sprains and strains

You cannot always prevent sprains and strains. Sprains and strains happen when you overstretch or twist a muscle.

Common causes are not warming up before exercising, tired muscles and playing sport.

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