

SPRAINS AND STRAINS

ARE STRAINS AND SPRAINS DIFFERENT?

Strains and sprains are often used interchangeably to describe overstretching or tearing of soft tissues in and around joints, but they are different.

A sprain refers to overstretching or tearing of **ligaments** (bands of tissue that connect bones in a joint). The ankle joint is often the site of a sprain.

A strain is the overstretching or tearing of **muscles or tendons** (tendons are cords of tissue that connect bones to muscles). Muscle strains (especially in short distance runners) commonly occur in the calf muscle and hamstring.

SYMPTOMS OF SPRAINS AND STRAINS

- The symptoms seen with a sprain or a strain are very similar, because both conditions are the result of very similar type injuries.
- The main difference is that with a sprain there may be **bruising** around the affected joint, whereas with a strain, there may be **spasms** in the affected muscle.
- Other symptoms for both injuries are:
 - swelling
 - limited flexibility
 - pain around the injured joint
 - inability to have the full range of movement of the joint.

CAUSES

It can happen to anybody at any time, but the following will increase the likelihood of strains and sprains:

- Sudden jolts or twists – very common with athletic activities or exercise including running or walking
- Accidents - such as falling or slipping
- Lifting heavy objects
- Pushing oneself past the comfort zone – overstretching, jumping too high, too far, too fast
- Sitting or standing in an awkward position for an extended period of time
- Prolonged, repetitive motion.

DEGREES OF SEVERITY

Twisting an ankle is common; it might be sore for a few minutes, but there is no swelling or loss of function...is this a sprain? The answer is no. There are different degrees of severity before it is classified as an actual sprain or strain:

- **Grade I** – some fibres are torn and the site is moderately painful and swollen, but function and strength are mostly unaffected
- **Grade II** – many fibres are torn and the site is painful and swollen, with some loss of function and strength
- **Grade III** – the soft tissue is totally torn, with considerable loss of function and strength. Grade III injuries often need surgical repair.

WHAT TO DO WITH A MILD INJURY?

- Stop activity and immediately start RICE. RICE is the technique used to treat mild sprains and strains.
 - **RICE** stands for Rest, Ice, Compression, Elevation.
 - Rest the injured joint/muscle
 - Use icepacks every two hours, applied for 15 - 20 minutes. Then remove the ice for 20 minutes and repeat. To avoid ice burns, use a cloth or towel in between the skin and the ice.
 - Compress or bandage the injured site firmly. Ensure that the whole joint is covered, but not too tight to impede blood supply.
 - Elevate (raise) the injured area above the heart height, whenever possible, to reduce swelling.
- Avoid exercise, heat, alcohol and massage which can worsen the swelling.
- If symptoms get worse within the first 24 hours, the patient should see a doctor for further medical investigation.

WHAT TO DO WITH A SEVERE INJURY?

As mentioned before, severe sprains and strains may require surgery to repair the damage.

If any of the following is experienced, a doctor should be consulted:

- Difficulty walking or standing without pain
- Inability to move or flex the affected joint
- Feeling numbness or tingling around the joint.



DISCLAIMER

TAKE NOTE

The information provided in this article is for education purposes only and does not serve as a medical diagnosis. Members should always consult their healthcare provider with serious symptoms.

Please note that Heritage Health plans do not necessarily cover the costs of the condition/s described.

