What is an ankle sprain?
Ankle sprains happen to people of all ages. They occur when you ‘roll your ankle’, which over-stretches the ligaments (the fibrous bands that hold the ankle together).

What are the symptoms?
When ligaments are damaged, there is pain, swelling and sometimes bruising. Too much swelling can slow the healing process. Pain is usually worst in the first two to three days.

Treatment
You may require an x-ray to determine if you have a broken bone (fracture).
Significant injuries may require an ankle brace, or even a plaster cast to allow ligaments to heal properly.
Some people who have repeated ankle sprains may need surgery to stabilize the weakened ligaments.
If you have pain, medications such as paracetamol, codeine (or a combination of both) may help. Anti-inflammatory medications can also help to reduce the swelling and pain. Ask your health-care professional what is best for you.

Prevention
There are simple measures you can take to reduce the risk of an ankle sprain.
- Warm up before exercise.
- Wear supportive shoes.
- If you have previously injured your ankle, you may need to tape or brace your ankle for sport. Speak to your physiotherapist for further information.

First aid for sprains
The initial treatment (first 72 hours) for ankle sprains is based on the ‘RICE’ principles: Rest, Ice, Compression and Elevation.

Rest
Avoid activities that cause pain. If you are unable to put weight on your leg comfortably, use crutches.

Ice
Wrap ice cubes in a damp towel, use frozen peas or a sports ice pack in a towel. Apply to the injured area for 15-20 minutes every one to two hours while you are awake. Never apply ice directly to the skin.

Compression
Apply a firm bandage from the toes to above the ankle. Ensure the bandage does not increase your pain or restrict blood flow to your toes.

Elevation
When resting, raise your foot so it is above the level of your heart.

Avoid ‘HARM’ – Heat, Alcohol, Re-injury and Massage.
In the first 48-72 hours, avoid:

Heat
Increases blood flow and swelling.

Alcohol
Increases blood flow and swelling, and can make you less aware of aggravating your injury.

Reinjury
Protect your joint until it has healed adequately.

Massage
Promotes blood flow and swelling. Massage can increase damage if begun too early.
Ankle sprains

What to expect

Most people fully recover in one to six weeks. If you are no better after a week, see your local doctor or physiotherapist. For more significant injuries, a physiotherapist can provide assistance with healing and rehabilitation. As the pain settles down after the first few days, gradually increase your level of activity.

Exercises

It is important to maintain flexibility and strength as you recover. Progress down the list of exercises as you are able. Perform each exercise three times, twice a day.

Exercise 1. Using a towel, pull your toes back as far as comfortable, and hold for 30 seconds.

Exercise 2. Keeping your foot flat on the ground, slide it back under the chair and hold for 30 seconds.

Exercise 3. Keeping your foot flat on the ground, bend your knee towards the wall and hold for 30 seconds.

Exercise 4. Rise up and down on your toes as many times as you can in a row. Do this with just the injured leg when you can. To make it harder still, do this exercise on a step with your heels off the edge.

Seeking help

In a medical emergency go to the nearest hospital emergency department or call an ambulance (dial 000).

See your local doctor or health care professional if you have not improved at all after a week, especially if you are still unable to put weight on your leg.

For health advice from a Registered Nurse you can call NURSE-ON-CALL 24 hours a day on 1300 60 60 24 for the cost of a local call from anywhere in Victoria.*

NURSE-ON-CALL provides access to interpreting services for callers not confident with English. Call 1300 60 60 24.

*Calls from mobile calls may be charged at a higher rate

Want to know more?

- Ask your local doctor or health care professional.
- Contact a physiotherapist.
- Visit the Better Health Channel
  www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au

Notes: