

Soft tissue injuries (Sprains and strains)

What are soft tissue injuries?

Soft tissues injuries include injuries to muscles, tendons and *ligaments* (not bone).

Tendons are fibrous bands that hold muscles to bone. Damage to muscles or tendons by overstretching is referred to as a 'strain'.

Ligaments are fibrous bands that hold bones together. Overstretching ligaments is referred to as a 'sprain'. Sprains and strains can happen to people of all ages with varied results.

What are the symptoms?

When soft tissues are damaged, there is usually pain, swelling and often bruising. A lot of swelling can slow the healing process.

In severe injuries, there may also be a broken bone (*fracture*). An x-ray may be needed to check for this.

Exercises

Gentle exercises and stretching should begin immediately to minimise stiffness. Mild pain should be expected, however significant pain should be avoided.

Unless you have been told otherwise, after the first few days slowly increase your activity levels as tolerated.

If you have a significant injury, you may need to avoid certain activities or movements until adequate healing has taken place. If you are unsure, ask your doctor, physiotherapist or health care professional.

A physiotherapist can provide you with exercises to improve muscle strength, joint flexibility and balance. These exercises will help you recover, limit pain and reduce the chance of the injury recurring.

What to expect

You can expect full recovery from most soft tissue injuries in one to six weeks. The length of time depends on your age, general health and the severity of the injury. In significant injuries, a plaster cast or splint may be needed. Sometimes surgery is the best option.

Painkillers may be required. In most cases paracetamol is enough. *Anti-inflammatory* medications may help, but these are not suitable for some people. Ask your health care professional for further advice.

Treatment for sprains

The initial treatment for soft tissue injuries is based on the principles of '**RICE**' and 'Avoid **HARM**'. These are most important in the 48-72 hours following the injury and can speed up recovery.

Rest Rest and avoid activities that cause significant pain (for example walking, raising your arm). You may need to use crutches or a sling.

Ice Wrap ice cubes in a damp tea towel, use frozen peas or a sports ice pack. Never put ice straight onto the skin. Use the ice pack for 15-20 minutes every one to two hours when awake.

Compression Apply a firm bandage that does not restrict circulation or cause additional pain. The bandage should cover the whole joint.

Elevation Raise the limb above the level of your heart, if possible. Support the limb with cushions or a sling to keep it raised when not walking or using it.

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.



Follow-up

You may need to see your local doctor or health care professional if the injury does not improve within a week. Further tests or treatment may be required.



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Notes:

Seeking help



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



For other medical problems see your local doctor or health care professional.



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.
- Visit a physiotherapist
- Visit the **Better Health Channel**
www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au

If you would like to receive this publication in an **accessible format**, please phone 9096 8064 or email edfactsheets@dhs.vic.gov.au

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