Type, Severity of Ankle Sprain Dictates Treatment

Ankle sprains can be one of the most frustrating injuries for an athlete. All it takes is one misstep or awkward landing to send an athlete writhing on the ground in pain. There is a difference between ankle strains and sprains, as well as lateral and high ankle sprains.

An ankle sprain stretches a ligament beyond its normal limits, while an ankle strain involves damage to the muscle or tendon. Predictably, ankle strains heal much more quickly than sprains, and even sprains have varying degrees of severity. High ankle sprains differ from the more common lateral ankle sprains in that the affected ligaments are above the ankle and often take longer to heal.

“Low ankle sprains typically involve an inward twisting of the ankle, while high sprains occur when the lower leg and foot twist outward,” explains Matt Holder, ATC, certified athletic trainer at Saint Francis Medical Center. “In either case, prompt medical attention is important to minimize swelling and avert chronic instability.”

Trainers categorize ankle sprains by severity, with a grade 1 sprain the least severe. Grade 1 sprains require little more than rest and ice to return to playing condition. Depending on the sport, a good tape job may provide enough stability to finish out a game.

Grade 2 sprains feature more pain and swelling, and require more treatment and rest before the athlete can return to competition. The athlete may be able to put some weight on the ankle, but any attempt to make an athletic move results in knee-buckling discomfort.

“If the athlete has severe pain, swelling and an inability to put any

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weight on that foot, they may have a grade 3 sprain,” Holder says. “This is relatively rare and may require a trip to the emergency room to rule out a fracture. Recovery times for grade 3 sprains can extend for several months.”

For more information on the treatment of ankle injuries, please call the Sports Medicine team at Saint Francis Medical Center at 573-331-5153.

**Strengthening Exercises Provide Protection for Ligaments**

While there is only so much an athlete can do to prevent ankle sprains incurred during the course of competition, there are a number of exercises that strengthen the leg muscles and provide an additional layer of protection for ligaments. These exercises also are useful during rehabilitation from injury, taking care to do only as much as the injured ankle will allow.

**Heel Raises** – Sit on the floor and extend your toes away from you while keeping your knee as straight as possible. Hold for 15 seconds and do 10 reps.

**Toe Raises** – Same position, except pull your toes back toward you while keeping your knee straight. Hold for 15 seconds and do 10 reps.

**Ankle Rotations** – Move the ankle slowly from side to side, up and down, and around in circles. Do these a few times per day.

**Step Up** – Place one foot on the first step of a staircase. Slowly straighten the knee of that leg while lifting the other foot off the floor, then slowly return the foot to the floor. Do this three to five times for both legs at least three times per day.

**Sitting Heel Raises** – Sit in a chair with your injured foot on the ground. Slowly raise the heel while keeping the toes on the ground. Return the heel to the floor. Repeat 10 times a few times per day. As your ankle heals, stand on the injured foot instead of sitting in a chair for this exercise.

**Balance Exercises** – Stand and place a chair next to one healthy leg. Stand on the opposite foot for 30 seconds. Gradually increase the time to a few minutes, and repeat at least three times per day. Perform this exercise with your eyes closed to increase the difficulty and refine your sense of balance.

**In and Out** – Turn your foot inward as far as possible and hold for 15 seconds. Straighten the leg and turn it outward as far as possible, holding again for 15 seconds. Do 10 reps each direction for both legs.

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**Patience, Treatment Are the Best Medicine for Ankle Injuries**

Despite the inclination for athletes to “walk it off,” ankle sprains require prompt medical attention to prevent chronic pain and long-term instability. Athletic trainers focus on strategies to minimize swelling to help the ankle heal faster.

“Even low-grade sprains benefit from immediate treatment,” says Matt Holder, ATC, certified athletic trainer at Saint Francis Medical Center. “Trying to do too much, too soon on a damaged ankle ligament can lead to a longer recovery than necessary.”

A common acronym for the treatment of ankle injuries is PRICE – Protection, Rest, Ice, Compression and Elevation.

**Protection** – Athletic tape, elastic wrap or a brace helps avoid further injury by protecting injured structures from unnecessary movement.

**Rest** – Minimize the amount of stress the athlete puts on the ankle. This can include the use of crutches for as long as it hurts to put any weight on the foot.

**Ice** – Ice massages, ice water soaks and ice packs can decrease the swelling and pain that comes with ankle injuries. Use ice immediately after the injury occurs, and for up to three days afterward.

**Compression** – Wrap the ankle to minimize swelling and bruising. The duration needed depends on the severity of the injury.

**Elevation** – Raising the ankle, higher than heart-level if possible, helps prevent swelling by minimizing the amount of blood that collects at the injury site.

“Treatment and rehabilitation needs to begin as soon as possible after sustaining an ankle injury,” Holder says. “Delaying either aspect of this process makes it less likely the injury will heal quickly or properly, especially in the case of a severe injury.”

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