

ANKLE SPRAINS

Ankle sprains are very common, and usually relatively minor, injuries, though without proper care they can lead to chronic ankle weakness and recurrent injury. While RICE therapy—Rest, Ice, Compression, and Elevation—is still the standard for care of any acute sprain, early physical therapy, often in conjunction with an ankle splint, is more and more often being used in the treatment of ankle sprains. While there are many different ways to go about this, one conservative set of recommendations follow.

PHASE I (Usually the first 1-3 days)

This is the time of acute pain and swelling immediately after injury. During this time, elevate the injured foot as much as possible, and apply ice 15-20 minutes 4-6 times a day. Wear your ankle splint continuously except to bathe or apply ice. For a minor sprain, you may be able to walk carefully with the ankle splint, but if pain is too severe, you may need to use crutches.

Exercises are very simple at this stage. After applying ice as above, put on your ankle splint, and sit on a bed or table with the injured foot extending beyond the edge. Slowly point your foot and toes down as far as possible. Count to 5 seconds, then point your foot/toes as far up as you can, again counting 5 seconds. Repeat this 10 times. After this, slowly print the alphabet in capital letters in the air with your foot, as if you were writing on a blackboard with your big toe.

Phase I ends when swelling is gone, and you can walk in your ankle splint without a limp. If you have not reached this point in 5-7 days, let us know so we can recheck you or have you seen by an orthopedist.

PHASE II (Usually the next 1 to 3 weeks)

You are able to walk in your ankle splint with little or no pain. You still may find your ankle swells slightly if you are on your feet too much. If this is the case, apply ice and elevate the foot as much as you can. If there is no swelling, most people find warm soaks or a heat pad, 15-20 minutes 4-6 times a day, to be comforting. Unless your job requires a lot of physical labor, you can probably return to work during this phase.

At this time, exercise becomes even more important, and should be performed at least 2, and preferably 4, times a day, while wearing your ankle splint. First, go through the exercises described in Phase I as a warm-up. Next, place a marble or similar object on the floor, and pick it up with the toes of your injured foot, bringing it up in front of you to the hand opposite the injured side. Drop the marble, and pick it up again, bringing it up behind your buttock to the hand on the injured side. Repeat this, passing the marble to each hand 5 times.

After this, you can begin heel-raises. To do this, stand with the feet about a foot apart, and rise up on your toes as far as you can without pain. Hold for a count of 3 seconds, then return to

the floor. Do this with the toes pointed straight forward, toes pointed in, and toes pointed out, working up to 10 times each way.

Next is the resistance press. Sit on the floor with the feet together flat against a wall. With the injured foot, push against the wall as hard as you can, holding for a count of 3 seconds. Next, push in against your good foot, holding for a count of 3 seconds. Then place your good foot on top of the injured foot, and pull back against it for 3 seconds. Finally, cross your good foot over your injured foot, and push out against it for 3 seconds. Work up to 10 repetitions in each direction.

Following this is a balance exercise. Stand on the injured foot, resting your good foot on the calf of the injured leg. Hold your hands out to the side with your eyes closed, and count 10 seconds. Open your eyes and place both feet on the floor. When you can keep your balance 10 times in a row, do it for 20 seconds at a time. When you can repeat this 10 times, do it for 30 seconds at a time, then advance to 40 seconds at a time. When you can repeat this 10 times, do it for 50 seconds at a time. When you can keep your balance twice in a row for 50 seconds, advance to 60 seconds, and continue until you can balance for 60 seconds twice in a row. This is not as easy as it sounds, and is designed to take place over several days to weeks, so resist the temptation to progress through it too fast.

PHASE III

At this point, your ankle feels pretty good, and you've likely returned to most of your routine activities. If you're like most people, you have probably gotten sick of these exercises by now, and are tempted to quit and throw this away. If you do, and you avoid re-injuring your ankle in the near future, you will probably still recover completely. If, however, you wish to compete athletically, there are some more exercises that should be performed.

As a starter, begin performing the exercises in Phase I and Phase II above without the ankle splint. You may wish to include the good ankle as well as the injured ankle, since it may actually be falling behind the one you've been working on. Also, when you can do all the heel-raises without difficulty, try doing them standing on one foot. When you can do this easily, put a book or 2X4 under your toes and do the heel-raises, first on two feet, then finally on one foot.

Next, replace your ankle splint, and try jogging in place. If you can do this painlessly, begin jogging in a straight line. Gradually increase to full speed running as tolerated. When you can run full speed without pain or a limp, try zig-zagging and running in a figure of eight. When you can make right-angle cuts in both directions at full speed, you should be able to fully participate in your sport. You may wish to continue to wear the ankle splint or tape your ankle while playing sports for the next few months, however, as additional protection against re-injury.