

Dealing with Those Painful Sprains and Strains

Described as sudden pain and swelling around a joint or muscle, sprains and strains are quite common in all age groups. Most of us have probably experienced at least one episode in our lives, resulting from some type of physical activity. Although these injuries are usually mild in nature, understanding their symptoms and treatments is important in ensuring a quick recovery.

Although the symptoms of both sprains and strains are quite similar their underlying causes are actually quite different. A sprain is the stretching or tearing of a ligament, often seen in the knees, ankles, or wrists. Ligaments are tough pieces of tissue that connect one bone to another. Sprains often result from walking on uneven surfaces, or landing awkwardly after a jump during a sports activity. A strain on the other hand is the stretching or tearing of a muscle or tendon. For this reason strains are better known as pulled muscles. Back injuries are one of the more common types of strains. Strains may occur when you slip on the ice, lift a heavy object, or continuously use a specific group of muscles.

The signs and symptoms of sprains and strains will depend on the severity of the underlying injury. Typically most people will complain of pain and swelling around the affected area, as well as stiffness and possible bruising or discoloration. More severe injuries will cause a substantial amount of pain and swelling around the area, and should therefore be looked at by your physician to rule out any bone fractures or dislocations.

Though anyone can experience a sprain or strain, there are some things that make people more prone to these injuries. Tired muscles are less likely to provide joints with the amount of support they need. Performing physical activities while tired puts you at a higher risk of stressing a joint, or overextending a muscle. It is also important to have an appropriate warm-up prior to any physical activity. This loosens your muscles and increases your joint's range of motion.

The treatment of sprains and strains depends on their severity, but can often be managed at home with various self care techniques. For mild injuries it is usually recommended to use an over-the-counter pain reliever such as ibuprofen (Advil®) or acetaminophen (Tylenol®). For cases with mild to moderate swelling, ice should be applied to the area as soon as possible. For more severe injuries your physician will often immobilize the area with a brace or splint to allow for proper healing.

For the immediate care of a sprain or strain the P.R.I.C.E approach should be used (protection, rest, ice, compression, and elevation). The area should initially be protected from further injury by immobilizing it with an elastic wrap, splint, or sling. Next you should avoid any activity that causes pain, swelling, or discomfort. Establishing a pain free range of motion will help stimulate quicker healing compared to no activity at all. The affected area should be iced immediately following the injury. An ice pack wrapped in a towel may be applied to the area at 15-20 minute intervals every 2-3 hours for the first few days. It is important to remember that ice should never be applied directly to the area to avoid freezing the skin. The cold will help reduce both pain and swelling in the injured joint or muscle. Other ways to stop swelling are to compress the area with an elastic bandage, and to elevate the injury above the level of the heart.

Although sprains and strains may take several weeks to fully heal, by understanding the underlying causes, symptoms and treatments you should expect a speedy recovery. Be sure to ask your community pharmacist for more information. Your health is our number one priority!

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