

Everything You Need to Know About Sports Injuries and Rehab



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Overview

Sports injuries occur during exercise or while participating in a sport. Children are particularly at risk for these types of injuries, but adults can get them, too.

You're at risk for sports injuries if you:

- haven't been regularly active
- don't warm up properly before exercise
- play contact sports

Read on to learn more about sports injuries, your treatment options, and tips for preventing them in the first place.

Types of sports injuries

Different sports injuries produce different symptoms and complications. The most common types of sports injuries include:

- **Sprains.** Overstretching or tearing the ligaments results in a [sprain](#). Ligaments are pieces of tissue that connect two bones to one another in a joint.
- **Strains.** Overstretching or tearing muscles or tendons results in a [sprain](#). Tendons are thick, fibrous cords of tissue that connect bone to muscle. Strains are commonly mistaken for sprains. [Here's how tell them apart](#).
- **Knee injuries.** Any injury that interferes with how the knee joint moves could be a sports injury. It could range from an overstretch to a tear in the muscles or tissues in the knee.
- **Swollen muscles.** Swelling is a natural reaction to an injury. [Swollen muscles](#) may also be painful and weak.
- **Achilles tendon rupture.** The Achilles tendon is a thin, powerful tendon at the back of your ankle. During sports, this tendon can break or rupture. When it does, you may experience sudden, severe pain and difficulty walking.
- **Fractures.** [Bone fractures](#) are also known as broken bones.
- **Dislocations.** Sports injuries may [dislocate a bone](#) in your body. When that happens, a bone is forced out of its socket. This can be painful and lead to swelling and weakness.
- **Rotator cuff injury.** Four pieces of muscle work together to form the rotator cuff. The rotator cuff keeps your shoulder moving in all directions. A tear in any of these muscles can [weaken the rotator cuff](#).

Sports injuries treatment

The RICE method is a common treatment regimen for sports injuries. It stands for:

- rest
- ice
- compression
- elevation

This treatment method is helpful for mild sports injuries. For best results, follow the RICE method within the first 24 to 36 hours after the injury. It can help reduce swelling and prevent additional pain and bruising in the early days after a sports injury. [Here's how to follow RICE, plus a recovery timeline](#).

Both over-the-counter and prescription medications are available to treat sports injuries. Most of them provide relief from pain and swelling.

If your sports injury looks or feels severe, make an appointment to see your doctor. Seek emergency care if the injured joint shows signs of:

- severe swelling and pain
- visible lumps, bumps, or other deformities
- popping or crunching sounds when you use the joint
- weakness or inability to put weight on the joint
- instability

Also seek emergency attention if you experience any of the following after an injury:

- difficulty breathing
- dizziness
- fever

Serious sports injuries can require surgery and physical therapy. If the injury doesn't heal within two weeks, contact your doctor for an appointment.

Sports injuries prevention

The best way to prevent a sports injury is to warm up properly and [stretch](#). Cold muscles are prone to overstretching and tears. Warm muscles are more flexible. They can absorb quick movements, bends, and jerks, making injury less likely.

Also take these steps to avoid sports injuries:

Use the proper technique

Learn the proper way to move during your sport or activity. Different types of exercise require different stances and postures. For example, in some sports, bending your knees at the right time can help avoid an injury to your spine or hips.

Have the proper equipment

Wear the right shoes. Make sure you have the proper athletic protection. Ill-fitting shoes or gear can increase your risk for injury.

Don't overdo it

If you do get hurt, make sure you're healed before you start the activity again. Don't try to "work through" the pain.

When you return after letting your body recover, you may need to ease yourself back into the exercise or sport rather than jumping back in at the same intensity.

Cool down

Remember to cool down after your activity. Usually, this involves doing the same stretching and exercises involved in a warmup.

Resume activity slowly

Don't be tempted to nurse your injury for too long. Excessive rest may delay healing. After the initial 48-hour period of RICE, you can start using [heat to help relax](#) tight muscles. Take things slowly, and ease back in to exercise or your sport of choice.

Sports injuries statistics

Sports injuries are common in younger adults and children. More than [3.5 million children and teens](#) are injured as part of an organized sports or physical activity each year, estimates Stanford Children's Health. [One-third](#) of all injuries in children are related to sports, too.

The most common sports injuries in children are sprains and strains. Contact sports, like football and basketball, account for more injuries than noncontact sports, like swimming and running.

A [2016 study](#) found that 8.6 million people, ages 5 to 24, have a sports injury every year in the United States. Researchers note males ages 5 to 24 make up more than half of all sports injury episodes.

The lower body is most likely to be injured (42 percent). The upper extremities make up 30.3 percent of injuries. Head and neck injuries combine for 16.4 percent of sports injuries.

Deaths from sports injuries are rare. When they do happen, they're most likely the result of [head injury](#).

Risks

Anyone may find themselves coping with a sports injury, regardless of the last time they suited up for the baseball diamond or squared off with a linebacker on the gridiron. But some factors put you or a loved one at an increased risk for injury.

Childhood

Because of their active nature, children are especially at risk for sports injuries. Children often don't know their physical limits. That means they may push themselves to injury more easily than adults or teenagers.

Age

The older you grow, the more likely you are to experience an injury. Age also increases the odds that you have sports injuries that linger. New injuries may aggravate these previous injuries.

Lack of care

Sometimes, serious injuries start off as small ones. Many injuries that result from overuse, such as tendonitis and stress fractures, can be recognized early by a doctor. If they're left untreated or ignored, they can develop into a serious injury.

Being overweight

Carrying around extra weight can put unnecessary stress on your joints, including your hips, knees, and ankles. The pressure is magnified with exercise or sports. This increases your risk for sports injury.

Children or adults who plan to begin participating in sports can benefit by having a physical examination by a doctor first.

Diagnosis

Many sports injuries cause immediate pain or discomfort. Others, like overuse injuries, might be noticed only after long-term damage. These injuries are often diagnosed during routine physical examinations or checkups.

If you think you have a sports injury, your doctor will likely use the following steps to get a diagnosis. These include:

- **Physical examination.** Your doctor may attempt to move the injured joint or body part. This helps them see how the area is moving, or how it's not moving if that's the case.
- **Medical history.** This involves asking you questions about how you were injured, what you were doing, what you've done since the injury, and more. If this is your first time visiting this doctor, they may also ask for a more thorough medical history.
- **Imaging tests.** [X-rays](#), [MRIs](#), [CT scans](#), and ultrasounds can all help your doctor and healthcare providers see inside your body. This helps them confirm a sports injury diagnosis.

If your doctor suspects you have a sprain or strain, they may recommend you follow the RICE method.

Follow these recommendations and keep an eye on your symptoms. If they get worse, that can mean you have a more serious sports injury.

Call your doctor

Call your doctor if there are signs of swelling or if it hurts to place weight on the affected area. If the problem is in the location of a previous injury, seek medical attention right away.

Contact a healthcare provider if you don't see any improvement after 24 to 36 hours of RICE.

Because a child's skeleton isn't fully developed, the bones are weaker than an adult's. Take extra precautions with a child's sports injuries. What looks like a tissue injury may in fact be a more serious fracture.

Don't ignore your symptoms. Remember, the earlier you get a diagnosis and treatment, the sooner you'll recover and get back in the game.