NHS
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Ankle sprain

Accident and emergency

Patient information

What is an ankle sprain?

An ankle sprain is a very common injury to the soft tissues around the ankle.

It happens when your foot twists or turns more than it should. This can stretch or tear the ligaments that support your ankle.

Symptoms may include:

- Pain
- Swelling
- Bruising
- Difficulty moving or walking normally.

How long will recovery take?

Most people feel better after a few days. Full healing can take about six weeks. This can vary depending on how bad the sprain is.

You are more likely to sprain your ankle again if it has not fully healed. **Be cautious when:**

- Walking on uneven ground
- Going up or down stairs
- Wearing unsupportive footwear.

How to treat your ankle sprain

Pain relief

- Take painkillers if recommended by your doctor.
- Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (like ibuprofen) are usually prescribed but they are not suitable for everyone. Please speak with your doctor before using them.

Cold therapy

- A cold pack (an ice pack or frozen peas wrapped in a damp towel) can also provide short-term pain relief. Apply to the sore area for up to 15 minutes, every few hours.

Rest

- Rest your ankle for the first 24 to 72 hours.
- However, it is important to gently move the ankle if possible. This prevents stiffness and supports healing.

Elevation

- Keep your ankle raised above your hips using pillows. This helps reduce swelling.

Early movement

- Try to put weight on your foot as soon as it is comfortable. This has been shown to help healing.
- Most people do not need crutches and are encouraged to walk as normally as possible.

No bandages needed

- We no longer recommend bandaging sprained ankles. Bandages do not help with pain or healing and may slow recovery.

Be aware

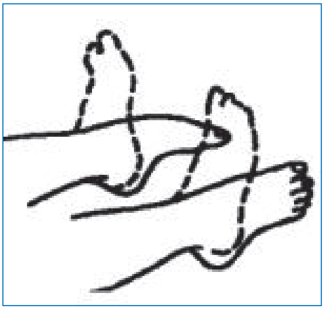
In the first 48 hours after injury avoid the following as they might make your symptoms worse:

- Hot baths or showers
- Heat packs or heat rubs
- Alcohol
- Massage.

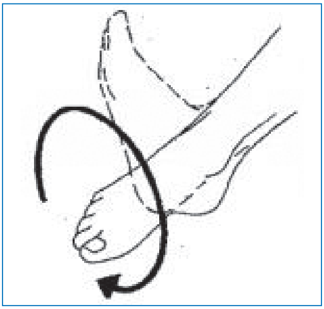
What exercises can I do to help my ankle heal?

These exercises should not increase your pain. Perform each exercise gently and slowly, only moving as far as feels comfortable. Practice each exercise up to 10 times, at two or three times per day.

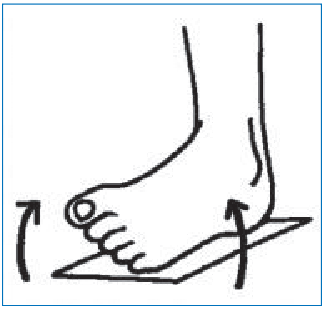
1. Point your foot up and down.



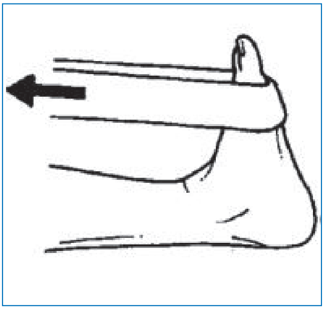
2. Make circles with your foot.
Change direction.



3. Place your foot on the floor. Rock your foot from side to side, lifting the inner and then outer border of your foot.



4. Sit with your leg straight out in front of you. Put a towel round your foot and pull it up towards you. Feel a stretch in the back of your calf.



General advice

- Keep moving your ankle as pain allows.
- The earlier you start gentle exercises, the better your recovery.
- Stay active once you have healed to maintain strength.
- Strengthen your ankles to help prevent future injuries.

When to seek medical help

- If you're still unable to put weight on your foot after one week
- If pain or swelling hasn't improved
- If symptoms get worse, not better.

In these cases, speak to your GP.

Further support

For general medical advice please use the NHS website, the NHS 111 service, walk-in-centres, or your GP.

NHS website www.nhs.uk/ provides online health information and guidance.

There are walk-in and urgent treatment services at Brighton Station, Crawley Urgent Treatment Centre, Lewes Victoria Hospital, Horsham Minor Injuries Unit and Bognor Regis War Memorial Hospital.

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This information is intended for patients receiving care in Brighton & Hove or Haywards Heath.

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