What are soft tissue injuries?

Soft tissues injuries include injuries to muscles, tendons and ligaments (not bone).

Tendons are fibrous bands that hold muscles to bone. Damage to muscles or tendons by overstressing is referred to as a ‘strain’.

Ligaments are fibrous bands that hold bones together. Overstretching ligaments is referred to as a ‘sprain’. Sprains and strains can happen to people of all ages with varied results.

What are the symptoms?

When soft tissues are damaged, there is usually pain, swelling and often bruising. A lot of swelling can slow the healing process.

In severe injuries, there may also be a broken bone (fracture). An x-ray may be needed to check for this.

Exercises

Gentle exercises and stretching should begin immediately to minimise stiffness. Mild pain should be expected, however significant pain should be avoided.

Unless you have been told otherwise, after the first few days slowly increase your activity levels as tolerated.

If you have a significant injury, you may need to avoid certain activities or movements until adequate healing has taken place. If you are unsure, ask your doctor, physiotherapist or health care professional.

A physiotherapist can provide you with exercises to improve muscle strength, joint flexibility and balance. These exercises will help you recover, limit pain and reduce the chance of the injury recurring.

What to expect

You can expect full recovery from most soft tissue injuries in one to six weeks. The length of time depends on your age, general health and the severity of the injury. In very severe injuries, a plaster cast or splint may be needed, or surgery may even be advised.

Painkillers may be required. In most cases paracetamol is enough. Anti-inflammatory medications may help, but these are not suitable for some people. Ask your health care professional for further advice.

Treatment for sprains

The initial treatment for soft tissue injuries is based on the principles of ‘RICE’ and ‘Avoid HARM’. These are most important in the 48-72 hours following the injury and can speed up recovery.

Rest

Rest and avoid activities that cause significant pain (for example walking, raising your arm). You may need to use crutches or a sling.

Ice

Wrap ice cubes in a damp towel, use frozen peas or a sports ice pack. Never put ice straight onto the skin. Use the ice pack for 15-20 minutes every one to two hours when awake.

Compression

Apply a firm bandage that does not restrict circulation or cause additional pain. The bandage should cover the whole joint.

Elevation

Raise the limb above the level of your heart, if possible. Support the limb with cushions or a sling to keep it raised when not walking or using it.

In the first 48-72 hours, Avoid ‘HARM’ – heat, alcohol, re-injury and massage.

Heat

Increases blood flow and swelling.

Alcohol

Increases blood flow and swelling, and can make you less aware of aggravating your injury.

Reinjury

Protect your joint until it has healed adequately.

Massage

Promotes blood flow and swelling. Massage can increase damage if begun too early.

Follow-up

You may need to see your local doctor or health care professional if the injury does not improve within a week.
Emergency Department Patient Information

SOFT TISSUE INJURIES (Sprains and strains)

Seeking help

Cabrini Emergency Department (ED) is staffed by experienced emergency doctors and nurses 24 hours a day, 7 days per week. If you have any questions about your ED treatment our qualified ED staff can be contacted on 9508 1500 at any time. If you need to return to Cabrini ED for ongoing care we would be glad to take care of you again and if this occurs within a week of your initial consultation the doctor’s fee will be bulk-billed.

In a medical emergency return to Cabrini ED if it is safe to do so or go to the nearest hospital emergency department or call an ambulance (dial 000).

See your local doctor or return to Cabrini Emergency Department if you have not improved at all after a week, especially if you are still unable to use your limb.

Want to know more?

- Contact Cabrini ED on 9508 1500
- Ask your local doctor or health care professional.
- Visit a physiotherapist
- Visit the Better Health Channel
  www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au

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