

All You Need To Know About Sprains and Strains

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BlueStreak athletes are committed to their sport. With that dedication comes great results achieved through hours of hard training. Increased activity levels may also mean a greater chance of sustaining an injury due to overuse or fatigue. The most common injuries athletes sustain are sprains and strains. What should an athlete do if he sprains an ankle or if she strains a muscle? Below are some tips to help athletes get back in the game as quickly as possible.

■ Sprain vs. Strain

A **sprain** is an injury to a ligament. A ligament is a strong, elastic band of tissue



that connects bones to hold a joint together. Examples of joints where ligament injuries are common are knees, ankles, wrists and shoulders. A sprain occurs when the ligaments are over-stretched or, in the worst cases, completely torn. The most common sprain in sports is an ankle sprain.

A **strain** is an injury to a muscle or tendon. Muscles are contractile tissues, which contract and relax like rubber bands to move the body. A rubber band can be stretched repeatedly and will always return to its normal length. However, if the band is pulled too far it will stretch so much that it will become loose or break. This rubber band example is like a muscle strain. If the muscle is stretched farther than it normally stretches — due to force through contact or pushing off in an awkward manner — the muscle breaks down and may even tear.

A **sprain** of a ligament will usually hurt right away. An athlete may see the swelling or bruising in the area immediately and find it hard to move the injured area. A **strain** of a muscle can hurt right away or several hours later. You may notice the injured area is swollen, tender or bruised. For advice on when to see a doctor versus when to treat the injury at home, take a look at the back page.

R

Rest the injured area immediately by taking weight and stress off the injured body part to prevent further injury.

I

Ice the injured body part immediately. Continue ice application for 15-20 minutes every 1-2 hours for the next 48 hours.

C

Compress the injury with a wrap around the injured body part. This helps to reduce swelling and limit movement.

E

Elevate the injured body part so that it is above the athlete's heart. This reduces pain and swelling.

■ Treatment for Sprains and Strains

Immediate treatment for a sprain or strain is **RICE**. RICE is an acronym that helps to remember the four most important components to treating sprains and strains. It stands for Rest, Ice, Compression, and

Elevation. Rest the injured area immediately and cease activity that causes pain to the area. Apply ice to the injured body part as soon as possible in order to reduce swelling. Continue to ice the injury every 1-2 hours for 15-20 minutes each time. Remember to use a paper towel between the ice pack and the skin in order to prevent frostbite. Elevate the area above your heart as much as possible. See the RICE treatment chart above.

After 48 hours it is okay to start using heat in the form of a warm compress or a heating pad on the injured area for approximately 15-20 minutes every other hour. This will both soothe the aching muscles and help improve circulation in the injured area. **Never apply heat during the first 24-48 hours of an injury** because this will increase the swelling and inflammation in the injured area and lead to a longer healing time. To know whether the injury is more serious and you need to see a doctor, refer to the box on the right.

■ Never Play Through an Injury

Playing through pain is something with which many athletes are familiar. Lungs burning at the end of the game and sore muscles from a tough training session the day before are typical tests of any athlete. However, there is a difference between a little pain from fatigue or soreness and the pain associated with an injury. Remember, injuries happen when athletes play sports, even if they are in great physical condition. Proper management of injuries means a quick return to the athlete's sport or activity. Never play through an injury. **Playing before an injury has had a chance to fully heal can lead to an even worse injury that might sideline a player even longer.** An athlete should let his or her coach, parents or trainer know of any injuries he or she sustains while playing.

Todd Wilkowski, PT, OCS, SCS, is double board-certified in Orthopedic and Sports Physical Therapy by the American Board of Physical Therapy Specialties and is a member of the American Physical Therapy Association. In 2002, he and business partner Patrick Walsh established Performance Physical Therapy, which has locations in two BlueStreaks. As a rehabilitation consultant to the New York Rangers hockey organization, Todd specializes in complicated orthopedic cases, sports injury rehabilitation, and the prevention and treatment of adolescent sports injuries.



For more information on the BlueStreak Advisory Council, visit www.chelseapiers.com/bluestreak.

Know When To See The Doctor

A visit to a doctor or physical therapist may be necessary if an athlete exhibits any of the following symptoms:

- The athlete is unable to move an injured body part or joint.
- There is an area of redness surrounding the injured area or there are red streaks spreading out from the injured area.
- The athlete cannot put weight on the injured area.
- The joint is unstable or "feels loose" after an injury.
- The injured area is numb.
- The athlete has previously injured the same area.

Athletes who train at Chelsea Piers BlueStreak in New York, NY and BlueStreak in Stamford, CT have Performance Physical Therapy, a leading group of physical therapists on site to administer the described RICE treatment as well as to advise whether or not an athlete should seek medical attention from a doctor or hospital.



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