

Exercises for Ankle Sprain

This handout explains exercises to help strengthen a sprained ankle.

What is an ankle sprain?

An ankle sprain occurs when the strong ligaments or muscles that support the ankle stretch beyond their limits and tear. A sprain can range from mild to severe, depending upon how much damage there is.



Why do I need to exercise my ankle?

Doing these exercises will help maintain motion, blood flow, and ankle strength as it heals from an injury.

A sprained ankle can occur when ligaments are injured.

What do I need to do?

When doing these exercises, remember that:

- None of these exercises should cause pain. If you have pain while doing one of the exercises, do not do it the next day. Try it again when your joint has had more time to heal.
- Your goal is to do all of the exercises 3 to 5 times a day without increased pain or swelling.
- If your ankle feels more sore or is more swollen a few hours or the morning after you exercise, you may have overdone it. If this happens:
 - Do the exercises only 1 time a day instead of 3, or reduce the number of repetitions (reps) you do. For instance, if the instructions say to do 20 reps, do only 10.
 - Elevate your ankle and apply cold packs for 10 minutes at a time, 2 to 3 times a day.



Exercises

Ankle Pumps

This exercise is great to do before or after applying ice packs. (See photos at left.)

- Sit upright or lie down with your injured leg propped up on a pillow as shown.
- Pull your foot up toward your head and then push away from you, as if you were stepping on the gas pedal in the car.
- Repeat 20 times.

Isometrics

Isometrics are exercises where you activate your muscles, but the joint doesn't move. These exercises help strengthen the muscles, which helps to protect the injured ligaments. (See photos below.)

- Lie on your back with your ankle against a pillow as shown.
- Without moving your knee, push your foot into the pillow and hold for 3 to 5 seconds. Your ankle should not move or move only as much as is shown in the photo. If you feel discomfort, reduce how much you move while pushing.
- Repeat 10 times toward the center of your body (*inversion*), 10 times to the outside of your body (*eversion*), and 10 times pointing away from your body (*plantar flexion*).



Inversion

Eversion

Plantar flexion



Seated Calf Raise

(See photos at left.)

- Sit on a hard surface with your feet about hips-width apart. Make sure your ankles are right below your knees.
- Push down on the balls of your feet until your heels rise off the ground. Do this as high as you can without discomfort.
- Your knees should stay over your ankles as you do this. Make sure there is even pressure on all of your toes.
- Relax, then repeat. Do this 10 times.



Towel Pulls

This exercise helps strengthen the muscles in your foot that control your arch. It's best to do this on a wood floor or other smooth surface so that the towel can move easily. (See photos below.)

- Spread a kitchen towel flat on the floor in front of a chair or other hard surface. Position the towel so that the long side is toward you.
- Sit on the chair with your bare feet on the towel, about hips-width apart. Make sure your ankles are right below your knees.
- Use your toes to pull the towel toward you, until it's all under your feet. You may have to use your hands to smooth out the wrinkles if it gets too bunched up and hard to move with your toes.
- Repeat 2 times down the width of a standard kitchen towel. This will be about 20 pulls.





Single Leg Balance

Retraining your balance after an ankle injury is very important. The muscles need to re-learn how to support the joint and the rest of the leg.

- Stand on both feet on a firm surface. Slowly bend the knee of your healthy leg and lift that foot off the floor.
- Be sure to keep your body straight. Avoid rotating or bending your body at your hips.
- Hold your knee up for as long as you can, up to 20 seconds.
- Focus on feeling the muscles of your foot on the ground as it works to keep your ankle steady. Use your big toe for extra support.
- Relax and repeat 5 times. If your ankle feels sore, stop the exercise for now. The next time you do this exercise, hold your knee up for a shorter time.

Questions?

Your questions are important. Call your doctor or healthcare provider if you have questions or concerns.

UW Medicine Sports Medicine Clinic: Call 206.598.DAWG (3294) and press 2 during clinic hours:

Monday-Thursday: 6:30 a.m. to 7 p.m.

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