

UNIVERSITY STUDENT HEALTH SERVICES • Fact Sheet

CARING FOR YOUR ORTHOPEDIC INJURY

SPRAINS, FRACTURES, OR BRUISES

1. For leg, ankle, or foot injuries, stay off the injured limb if weight-bearing causes much discomfort. Instead, use crutches to move about.
2. Keep the injured area elevated.
 - Injured arms or hands should be elevated higher than the heart.
 - Injured legs or feet should be higher than the waist.
3. Ice the injured area for the first 24-48 hours to decrease swelling and pain (see “How to Use Ice” below).
4. An elastic or ace bandage may be necessary for several days to decrease swelling and discomfort.
 - When putting on a bandage, start below the injured area and wrap back up around and above the injury. This will control swelling better.
 - Wrap the bandage firmly. Bandages that are too tight can cause swelling and decreased circulation to the area.
 - Check the injured area frequently for signs of poor circulation. Loosen the bandage if you notice any excessive swelling, discoloration, numbness, or coldness to the area. Seek medical care if symptoms do not improve.
 - Remove the bandage at bedtime each night.

MUSCLE STRAINS

1. Ice the injured area for the first 24-48 hours to reduce swelling and pain.
2. Then you may add heat to loosen tight muscles and to decrease joint stiffness (see “How to Use Heat” below). Heat applied before any stretching or exercise can prevent reinjury of that muscle.
3. Rest is important for the first few days. Then start any stretching or range of motion exercises recommended by your healthcare provider.

HOW TO USE ICE

1. Ice should be used for the first 24-48 hours after the injury or until the swelling goes away.
2. To make your own ice pack, place cubed or crushed ice in a plastic bag. If you don't have ice, use a bag of frozen vegetables instead.
3. To prevent frostbite, wrap the ice pack in a wet towel or washcloth.
4. You may use an elastic or ace bandage to hold the ice pack in place. First wrap the bandage a few times around the injury, then place the ice pack over the bandage and roll the rest of the bandage around the ice pack to keep it snug against the skin.
5. Do not apply ice for more than 20-30 minutes at a time. Repeat this every 3-4 hours.
6. When ice is first applied, you will feel coldness followed by burning. After several minutes, the area will become numb.

HOW TO USE HEAT

1. Do not use heat in the first few days after an injury or while swelling is still present. This is because heat increases blood supply to the area and can worsen swelling.
2. You may use either moist heat or dry heat. Moist heat penetrates more deeply, but dry heat may be easier to use.
 - Moist heat options include soaking the injured area in a warm bath, running warm water on it in the shower, or laying a washcloth soaked in warm/hot water over it. Do not heat a wet washcloth in the microwave, as the washcloth can overheat and cause a burn.
 - Dry heat options include electric heating pads, saunas, and hot water bottles.

HOW TO USE HEAT (continued)

3. You can make your own heat pack by creating a “rice sock”:
 - Fill a thick tube sock with uncooked rice. Do not use minute rice. Then knot up the end or tie it closed with a string.
 - Heat the rice sock in a microwave. Placing a cup of water in the microwave adds moisture during the heating process.
 - Be careful not to overheat the sock and burn your skin! Heat the sock first for several seconds, test the temperature on your skin, and then adjust heating time in small increments as needed.
4. For minor injuries, apply heat for 15-20 minutes at a time. For more intense injuries, longer sessions may be necessary. Repeat up to every hour as needed.
5. Do not fall asleep while applying heat as you are at risk of burning your skin!

PAIN MEDICATIONS

1. Over-the-counter pain relievers like ibuprofen (Advil or Motrin), naproxen (Aleve), or acetaminophen (Tylenol) can be effective for pain control. Take ibuprofen or naproxen with food to avoid an upset stomach.
2. Stronger pain medications may be prescribed by your healthcare provider in certain cases. These types of medications can cause drowsiness and should not be mixed with other sedating medicines or substances (eg. alcohol). Do not drive or operate heavy machinery while taking these medications

A WORD ABOUT PAIN: If the pain from your injury worsens or becomes severe despite following these instructions, consult your health care provider.