

Ankle Sprain

Condition: Ankle sprains involve the stretching or tearing of the ligaments that hold together the ankle joint and can be classified as either mild, moderate, or severe.

Background: The most common ankle sprains are lateral ligament sprains (85% of all sprains) and occur from rolling of the foot and rotation of the lower leg. As the foot rotates, the 3 main ligaments supporting the ankle tear in succession, depending upon the severity of the sprain.

Risk Factors: Lateral ankle sprains occur most commonly in athletics, comprising 2-25% of all sports injuries. Up to 40% of ankle sprains become a long-term problem.

History and Symptoms: Following injury, swelling and bruising are observed. Pain, which is often worse with weight bearing; altered walking; and decreased range of motion are reported. Mild sprains typically heal within 12 days, moderate sprains heal within 2 weeks, and severe sprains heal after 4.5-26 weeks. Symptoms may worsen before starting to improve. Swelling may take months to completely resolve, and decreased range of motion and weakness may persist.

Physical Exam: Physical examination may reveal altered walking, tenderness near the injured ligaments, and swelling. Stability of the ligaments should be assessed, and a full assessment of movement should be performed in both the affected and unaffected ankles.

Diagnostic Process: X-rays, ultrasound, or magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) may be used to rule out fractures or to determine the severity of the sprain.

Rehab Management: Most ankle sprains warrant “PRICE” therapy, consisting of protection, relative rest, ice, compression, and elevation to reduce swelling, minimize pain, and restore range of motion. More conservative approaches may utilize a walking boot and rest in early care. Your physical medicine and rehabilitation (PM&R) physician, also known as a physiatrist, may prescribe a rehabilitation plan intended to optimize function and strengthen the ankle, using appropriate exercises. Pain can be relieved with oral or topical medications and by reducing swelling. Using ankle supports, such as elastic bandages or tape, encourages a faster return to sports and work compared to complete immobilization of the ankle. For those with persistent symptoms, your physiatrist may recommend and perform different procedures to help recovery and the healing process.

Other Resources for Patients and Families: PM&R physicians work with patients and coaches or employers as well as with athletic trainers, physical therapists, and orthotists. Patients should be taught appropriate home exercises and balance training, and athletes should receive a sport-specific program.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is PM&R?

Physical medicine and rehabilitation (PM&R), also known as physiatry, is a primary medical specialty that aims to enhance and restore functional ability and improve quality of life to those with injuries, physical impairments or disabilities affecting the brain, spinal cord, nerves, bones, joints, ligaments, muscles and tendons. PM&R physicians, known as physiatrists, evaluate and treat the whole body, maximize patients' independence in their daily life and are experts in designing comprehensive, patient-centered treatment plans to empower patients to achieve their goals. By taking the whole body into account, they can accurately pin-point problems, decrease pain, assist in recovery from devastating injuries and maximize overall outcomes and performance with non-surgical and peri-surgical options. To learn more, visit www.aapmr.org/aboutpmr.

What makes PM&R physicians unique?

PM&R physicians' training focuses not just on treating medical conditions, but on enhancing the patient's performance and quality of life in the context of those medical conditions. They focus not only on one part of the body, but instead on the development of a comprehensive program for putting the pieces of a person's life back together – medically, socially, emotionally and vocationally – after injury or disease. PM&R physicians make and manage medical diagnoses, design a treatment plan and prescribe the therapies that physical therapists or other allied therapists perform or that are carried out by the patients themselves. By providing an appropriate treatment plan, PM&R physicians help patients stay as active as possible at any age. Their broad medical expertise allows them to treat disabling conditions throughout a person's lifetime.

Why see a PM&R physician?

A PM&R physician will thoroughly assess your condition, needs, and expectations and rule out any serious medical illnesses to develop a treatment plan. By understanding your condition and goals, you and your PM&R physician can develop a treatment plan suited to your unique needs.

How do I find a PM&R physician near me?

Visit www.aapmr.org/findapmrphysician or contact your primary care physician for a referral.