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The evidence used in the preparation of this leaflet is available on request. Please email: patient.information@salisbury.nhs.uk if you would like a reference list.

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Sprains and Strains (1 of 2)

Sprains and strains are the most common type of injury. Virtually any part of your body can be sprained or strained from an accident, sporting injury or even from doing a job around the home.

Sprains

A sprain is a stretch or tear to a ligament, the tissue that holds two or more bones together. Symptoms of a sprain can include pain, swelling, bruising and restriction of movement in the affected area.

Strains

A strain is a twist, pull or tear of a muscle or tendon (the tough, narrow tissue at the end of a muscle that connects it to the bone). It is caused by over-stretching or over-contracting a muscle. Symptoms of a strain can include pain, muscle spasm and weakness in the muscle. Strains are common injuries in many sports, particularly those that involve running, jumping or rapid changes of direction.

Signs that may suggest a more severe injury include:

- severe pain which does not ease
- immediate and profuse swelling
- deformity – the injured part of your body may look misshapen
- extreme loss of function, for example you are unable to put any weight on your leg
- noises (grating or cracking) at the injury site
- a lot of tenderness over a bone.

If you feel your injury is severe you should ring to talk to a triage nurse or duty doctor at your surgery. If your surgery is closed you should contact your local out-of-hours service or NHS Direct or go to your local accident and emergency department.

First aid for sprains and strains

Sprains and strains can usually be treated at home with **PRICE**. This stands for:

Protection – this depends on the severity of the injury. You may need to use crutches if you are struggling to walk.

Rest - two days (48 hours) of rest is usually recommended. After 2 days we recommend that gentle movements should start but this time may be shorter or longer depending on the how severe the injury is.

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Ice – this should be applied to the area as soon as possible after injury to help reduce swelling and for pain relief. It should be applied for no more than 20 minutes every 2 hours. The ice must not touch the skin directly as this may cause a cold burn, so place a damp towel over the injured part first. A pack of frozen peas wrapped in a damp tea towel is often suggested as a household remedy. Do not use ice if you are diabetic, or over areas of skin that are in poor condition or with poor sensation to heat or cold. Also, do not use ice packs on the left shoulder if you have a heart condition. Do not use ice packs around the front or side of the neck.

Compression - compress or bandage the injured site, to limit swelling and protect the injured limb. Use as soon as possible after injury and continue for about 72 hours. Tubigrip is a good compression bandage and a pharmacist can advise on the correct size and how to apply this.

Elevation – try to raise the injured area to an elevated but comfortable height in the first 72 hours (above heart height wherever practical), especially at night. Gravity helps reduce swelling by draining away excess fluid.

Medication for sprains and strains

Medication may not be needed if the sprain or strain is mild.

Painkillers such as paracetamol are useful to ease pain. It is best to take paracetamol regularly, for a few days or so, rather than every now and then. A doctor may prescribe additional painkillers such as codeine if the pain is more severe.

After 48 hours

Movement should replace rest. For most sprains and strains this will simply mean starting to use the injured part more freely. Don't do anything that causes much pain, but gently get the joint moving again by doing gentle exercises several times a day. The aim is to get the joint moving in all normal directions, and to prevent it becoming stiff.

You should not play sport or do vigorous exercise involving a sprained joint for 3-4 weeks after an injury.

Outcome

Symptoms and swelling do gradually settle. Most sprains and strains improve after a few days, and the pain eases. However, the pain may take several weeks to go completely, especially when you use the injured joint. You should notice a gradual improvement in your symptoms within 4-6 weeks. If you are not improving after this time, or are concerned about your progress, please seek further advice from your GP or other health professional, who may decide that a referral to a physiotherapist is required.

For further information contact:

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