

Acute soft tissue injury advice sheet

The immediate treatment of soft tissue injuries

The term soft tissue usually refers to muscle, ligament or tendon. The first and normal response of soft tissue to an injury is inflammation. This involves bruising within the tissues (bleeding), swelling and pain. If inflammation is allowed to continue, blood and swelling will be left in the injured area delaying the natural healing process and the return to full activities. There may also be reduced movement.

What to expect

Full recovery usually takes between one and six weeks. The length of time depends upon your age, general health and the severity of the injury. Painkillers may be required. Ask your doctor or pharmacist for further advice.

First 3 days

In the first 3 days following injury, the following guidelines should be followed:

- P** - Protection
- R** - Rest
- I** - Ice
- C** - Compression
- E** - Elevation

Protection: It is necessary to protect the injured area from further injury. The amount of protection depends upon the extent of the injury and may involve the use of a sling or crutches.

Rest: Resting the injured area is necessary to prevent aggravating the injury. It does not mean stopping all activity. Moving a joint as pain allows will help prevent joint stiffness.

Ice: Ice reduces blood flow to the injured area and helps to limit swelling. It also reduces pain. Use a bag of frozen peas (in a damp towel) or a cold gel pack and place on the injured area. It is most effective if applied within 5-10 minutes of injury. Ice should be applied for 20 minutes every one to two hours and should be continued for at least three days after injury. Do not leave on for more than 30 minutes as this then encourages blood flow to the area.

Do not apply ice if you have circulation problems.

Do not apply ice if you cannot tell the difference between hot and cold.

Do not apply ice directly to the skin as this may cause an ice burn.

Compression: This helps to decrease the amount of swelling and bleeding. This can be applied using a stretch bandage that does not restrict circulation or cause additional pain. The bandage should cover the area.

Elevation: Elevating an injured limb will help to reduce swelling. If possible, raise the limb above the level of your heart. Support the limb with cushions or a sling to keep it raised when not walking or using it.

Things to avoid after an injury:

- **Do not** continue to exercise the injured area.
- **Do not** soak in a hot bath or apply heat to the injured area as this will increase blood flow and, therefore, increase bleeding and swelling.
- **Do not** have the affected area massaged as this promotes blood flow and swelling. It may also damage newly forming muscle or ligament fibres.
- **Do not** stretch an injured muscle for the first 3 days as you will put too much strain on muscle fibres which are trying to heal.
- **Avoid** alcohol as it increases blood flow and swelling and can make you less aware of aggravating your injury.

After 3 days

After the first 3 days a regime of MICE is recommended.

M - Movement

I - Ice

C - Compression

E - Elevation

Movement: Gentle exercises and stretching should be done to minimise stiffness. Mild pain should be expected, however significant pain should be avoided. Slowly increase your activity levels as tolerated over the first few days. If you have a significant injury, you may need to avoid certain activities or movements until adequate healing has taken place. If you are unsure, ask your doctor or physiotherapist. A physiotherapist can provide you with exercises to improve muscle strength, joint flexibility and balance. These exercises will help you recover, limit pain and reduce the chance of the injury recurring.

Can I put weight through my injured limb?

If it is a leg injury, crutches may be issued by the hospital emergency department for resting the injured leg and helping with pain. After the first 3 days, it is important to slowly start putting more weight through your leg unless otherwise instructed. Your physiotherapist will advise you on this.

Follow up

You may need to see your local doctor or physiotherapist if the injury does not improve within a week. Further tests or treatment may be required.